Church and State in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1956 Part I

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In this article we shall deal with the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state during the years 1948 to 1956.* This was the most tragic period in the life of the church and the darkest time in the history of the Czech and Slovak nations. Relations between the communists and the church can be divided into two periods: February 1948 to June 1949, and thereafter. It can roughly be said that, during the first period, efforts to achieve an agreement were prevalent, while the second was dominated by open conflict.

Immediately after the communist takeover in February 1948, there were no favourable conditions for any compromise — either on the national or the international level. Characteristically, the communist leadership looked upon all public affairs from the position of power politics. This was how the church was regarded, and the state's relationship to it was formed accordingly. The church was considered to be a political force threatening the communist monopoly of power rather than a cultural and social institution. Only a few days after the February takeover, both the Chairman of the Communist Party, Klement Gottwald, and its General Secretary, Rudolf Slánský, proclaimed the church to be the last and most dangerous enemy of the regime. Slánský spoke of the administrative organisation of the church in terms applicable to the structure of a political party: "Its organisational network is perfect," he used to say to communist functionaries, "its deaneries are in fact district secretariats, its diocesan offices are actually regional political secretariats."

*During the three years immediately following the end of the Second World War Czechoslovakia was governed by the "National Front", a provisional coalition government pledged to a democratic socialist programme. Communist influence in the government rapidly grew, initially on a democratic basis (the party won a third of the votes at the May 1946 elections) but then by increasingly undemocratic means; in February 1948, 14 ministers of the moderate parties resigned in protest against communist infiltration of the police and security forces, and at the 1948 elections there was a single list of candidates, all of whom were approved by the Communist Party. The party thus came to power in what amounted to a coup d'état.

None of the communist leaders ever had any doubts about the necessity for a basic ideological conflict between the party and the church. Opinions differed only as to the favourable moment for provoking it. The church's link with the Vatican was considered especially dangerous. The ideology of the international communist movement depicted the Vatican as an instrument of world imperialism. In the countries of the Soviet bloc, the Vatican's task was allegedly to make the church an alternative power opposed to the authority of the state power. The Prague communist leaders shared this concept and this gave birth to the idea of separating the church from the Vatican. The creation of a national church, independent of the Vatican and serving the interests of the state, became the ultimate goal of state policy towards the church. All steps taken were guided towards this aim for a full eight years. Among the most important was the attempt to bring about internal differences within the church, which was intended to isolate and ultimately replace its hierarchy, considered to be the main tie with the Vatican and the chief obstacle to the realisation of this aim.

On the other hand, the church dignitaries did not trust the new government's proclamations that it would respect religious freedom; they could not believe that an anti-Christian government could have a good relationship with the church. A series of actions directed against church institutions, mainly by local party officials, in February 1948 and thereafter, confirmed their mistrust. Although they hoped for good relations with the government, for a number of reasons, they could not allow themselves to be tied to the new regime by giving it their support and proclaiming their loyalty to it. Some of their main reasons were:

1) uncertainty about the future actions of the communist government aptly expressed by Bishop Trochta who said, when talking to minister A. Čepička: "You have an idea what the church is about, but we hardly know what you are about";
2) the conviction that the communists' efforts to achieve an agreement were motivated by their wish to reinforce their position before the election in May 1948;
3) international considerations: the creation of a precedent of a political alliance between the church and a communist government would be the first of its kind in history. Trochta expressed it thus: "Nobody else is as yet facing this reality and, therefore, many could call us traitors."

The position of each side became more precise and clear during negotiations. The representatives of the authorities, although guided by the needs of the moment and making promises never meant to be kept, did not abandon their ultimate goal of a national church. The bishops' attitude was determined by two factors: 1) hope of achieving a peaceful co-existence with the state and so postponing open conflict; 2) refusal to

retreat from their decision to protect the rights of the church and its followers and to form no ties with a political regime which had already demonstrated its hostility towards the church.

Negotiations between church and state began immediately after the takeover of February 1948. On 2 March Minister A. Čepička, the General Secretary of the National Front (who was in charge of church matters), paid a visit to the Church's Primate, Archbishop Josef Beran. This visit was decided upon by Slánský and Čepička with the aim of "persuading the Archbishop to adopt publicly, in the name of the church, a positive attitude towards the February takeover". After prolonged discussion, during which the subject of anti-church actions by some local officials was brought up, Archbishop Beran nonetheless agreed to call an episcopal conference at which he would present the government's demands. In a letter dated 4 March, the bishops informed Čepička of the result of their debate, making three points important for subsequent development:

1) they considered it unnecessary to issue any comment on the recent change of government "since the Catholic Church is not allied to any political system";
2) the church's activities would be of a purely religious character and the bishops would strictly maintain its apolitical nature, with no party allegiance. In this context, their earlier opposition to priests standing for Parliament was mentioned;
3) the improper behaviour of some party officials towards church institutions and dignitaries was pointed out.

This letter disappointed Gottwald, Slánský and Čepička, but they did not give up. On 8 March Čepička, this time accompanied by the Chairman of the Christian Democratic Party (*Lidova strana*), Minister Alois Petr, called on Beran again. In his subsequent report, Čepička informed Gottwald of the Archbishop's suggestion that a Council for Church Affairs be formed, composed of representatives of both church and government. He mentioned also the Archbishop's "apparent willingness to issue a public statement" and his reassurance that "he would assist personally in preventing any conflict". This raised the hopes of the communist leaders again. At that time, their extraordinary interest in the bishops' statement was due to their fear that the church would provide serious opposition in the forthcoming elections. In their view, the church was the main reason for the considerable influence which the Catholic People's Party had even after the February takeover. They feared that, once the decision to hold single-party elections was taken, the bishops would appeal to people to vote with "blank" (i.e. spoilt) ballot papers. The approaching elections were the overwhelming reason for continuing with the negotiations.

The Commission for Religious Affairs (CRA) was formed on 18 March as a body associated with the National Front and not with the government (as opposed to the "Church Six", an advisory body subordinate to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party). Five days later, Slánský issued directives to all regional secretariats to rectify, decisively and without delay, all the improper acts committed against church institutions "because the class enemy could use them against us". However, improper treatment of church institutions still occurred occasionally, either by minor local party officials on their own initiative, or, in a covert way, by the central party organs themselves.

In April the question of priests standing for Parliament became the most important issue of the day. The episcopal conferences of November 1947 and January 1948 had decided against all participation of clergy in politics. They were forbidden to stand for Parliament. The Central Committee of the Communist Party, however, was relying on the candidacy of some priests. Priests had been Members of Parliament before. The candidacy of Fr Josef Plojhar, who had been appointed Minister of Health, was especially important to them. The Central Committee discussed this problem at its session on 2 April. Two points of view were argued: 1) to press for the candidature of clergy, despite the episcopal prohibitions; 2) not to insist on it, but to make use of priests for party purposes in other ways, "since," to quote Slánský, "it is in our interest not to bring the situation to an open rift." Čepička supported the former point of view, Slánský the latter. Slánský's proposal was accepted by majority vote. On 21 April, Archbishop Beran informed the clergy of his diocese that they were not permitted to stand for Parliament and asked the existing members to stand down and be replaced by laymen as soon as possible. The following day Archbishop Matocha of Olomouc followed Beran's example. Shortly afterwards, all priests participating in any way in political life received a warning letter from Beran. Beran's action was motivated by the constant and unremedied wrongs done to church institutions and by the efforts of the National Front to draw the clergy into political activities without the knowledge or permission of the bishops.

The communist leadership attempted to save the situation by negotiating with the Archbishop on 4 May. The government was represented by Ministers Čepička, Petr and Kopecký. The topics raised at this meeting were 1) church cooperation with the National Front; 2) candidature of priests for Parliament; 3) a pastoral letter expressing loyalty towards the government.

Beran agreed to put those points to an episcopal conference, and its resolution was sent to Čepička. It included a prohibition on the candidacy of the clergy for any government posts. The one exception was the Commission for Religious Affairs, and even then only provided that the

candidate had approval from his bishop.

Čepička reported to the Presidium on the same day, and, on the basis of secretly obtained information about the episcopal conference, divided the bishops into three categories:

1) the most reactionary, who refused to collaborate at all. This group included the bishops of Slovakia and the Czech bishop Pícha;
2) Beran's group, which was well aware of the forthcoming conflict;
3) the progressive bishops Trochta and Hlouch.

The key problem discussed by the Presidium was whether or not to postpone open conflict. A resolution to maintain the present state of affairs and concentrate upon stopping the bishops' possible appeal to people to return spoilt ballot papers was passed by a majority, as was a resolution to continue with negotiations on "practical matters". As far as the election of priests to Parliament was concerned, they decided to insist only on the candidacy of Fr Plojhar.

The decision of the episcopal conference led to a speedier approach to the negotiations. The Commission for Religious Affairs met on 7 May. Čepička presented the Presidium's resolution to do everything possible to keep up mutual collaboration, and he suggested that the following items be put on the agenda of meetings with the representatives of the church: the celebration of Corpus Christi Day, Sunday working brigades, church property, legislation concerning education and church schools, revision of diocesan borders, and religious and church publications.

The first meeting with the representatives of the church took place on 10 May. Trochta led the church delegation and Čepička the National Front delegation. There were seven further meetings during which Čepička's apparent willingness to concede to the demands of the church was astonishing. Only the questions of church property and of the diocesan borders, which, according to the *modus vivendi*, were subject to the jurisdiction of the Vatican and the government, remained unresolved.

The tone of the discussions became quite hostile on 24 May. Plojhar's application for permission to stand for Parliament had been refused by the bishops with the added warning that he would be suspended if he disregarded their decision. Čepička described the refusal as an "attack on the government, inspired by the Vatican". He specified that clarification of the church's attitude towards the elections would be a condition of any further negotiations. He said it was the church's responsibility whether agreement or war would follow: "Should it be the latter, it would mean the end of the church, as it cannot win." The gist of Trochta's answer was: "We bear that in mind, and know that we have temporarily lost. But the church has existed for centuries, whereas governments are transient and short-lived." This sharp discussion was ended by Čepička's appeal to the

bishops to reconsider their decision on Plojhar's candidacy. During an all-night session, however, the bishops confirmed their decision. The National Front then stopped the negotiations.

It was only after the elections of 11 June that they were re-opened, this time at the request of the bishops, who were trying to save the church schools. The church's position became even worse after the elections. Harassment by the communist officials at all levels alike increased with the growing confidence of the party leadership, boosted by the election results. From these they deduced that the church had been "neutralised". Nevertheless they considered it to be an organisation which, in the words of Gottwald, still "promised to become, in the future, a basis for reaction, hidden under the veil of religion".

Gottwald himself was inclined to be optimistic about further developments. He showed a certain understanding of the position of the bishops, especially those of Slovakia, whom he called the "fighting cockerels", because "so far we have given them nothing, we have only taken from them." At a meeting of the Commission for Religious Affairs, Čepička granted people permission to send their children to church schools if they so wished. Agreement on other matters was also reached. The church representatives promised to cooperate with Gottwald's installation as President of the Republic in traditional style, with a *Te Deum* Mass, bell-ringing and an audience of bishops.

At a following meeting a week later, Čepička presented two messages from Beran, both of which should have been read publicly in all churches on 20 June, the day of religious services celebrating the presidential election. One concerned Plojhar's suspension; the other announced that although church participation had been demanded by the state, this did not mean that the church was submitting to an alien concept of its role. The communist leadership thought this action by Beran resulted from pressure from the Vatican as well as from the hierarchy. According to a state security report on a seven-hour discussion by bishops at the Papal Legation, there was a clash between the bishops and the Vatican representatives. The latter demanded Plojhar's excommunication and a sharp rebuke against "collaborator priests"; the former wanted only Plojhar's suspension. Čepička made the alteration of Beran's proclamations a condition of any further cooperation. Trochta and Čársky left to negotiate with the Archbishop, who told them firmly that there would be no more changes in spite of anticipated reprisals. Čepička closed the meeting by saying menacingly: "Socialism will go on existing without the church, not so the church without socialism. Anyone who can't grasp that is beyond help."

Thus open conflict was proclaimed. But it was a further ten months before it erupted in full strength. In the meantime, both sides were preparing themselves for it, while at the same time wishing somehow to

avoid it. The communist leadership and the state broke all existing agreements, stopped further Catholic publications, took administrative measures against publishing houses, dissolved some church associations and abolished many church schools. Sixty-eight priests and a few hundred laymen were tried for so-called "abuse of their positions within the church". The government organised campaigns demanding that the bishops suspend all the convicted priests. The clergy were pressurised into collaboration. A network of informers was built up around church officials.

The long-term state formula for the struggle against the church was formulated during the summer. Suggestions were circulated for a solution to the religious problem, and worked out during confidential talks between Čepička, Gottwald and Slánský, the main points of which were:

1) The final goal was to isolate the Catholic Church from the Vatican and transform it into a separate national church;
2) The immediate task was to isolate the Catholic Church from other churches, to win over the lower clergy, to neutralise episcopal influence and then use the church as an instrument of "our wishes and aims".

The strategy was to have three stages. The first was to persuade the faithful of the regime's positive attitude towards religion, to expose the church hierarchy as the servant of a foreign power, the Vatican, and to prepare legislation concerning the churches and prosecute all attempts to use religion to contravene government policy. The second was to isolate the church hierarchy and create new bodies representative of the church, to be called the Associations of Czech and Slovak Catholics, with the participation of the priests. The government would then treat these Associations as representative of the church. The third would be a break with the Vatican achieved by both Associations proclaiming a National Catholic Church independent of Rome, taking over church property and ordaining new bishops.

It was Slánský who dealt with church-state relations and the ultimate aims of state policy towards the church, at a meeting of the Information Bureau held in June 1948. A Soviet delegation consisting of Malenkov and Suslov was present. "They would congratulate us, if we could achieve this!" Slánský later reported to his leadership.

The church's preparedness for the conflict was very limited. It was on the defensive and had few resources at its disposal. The bishops could imagine neither the extent nor the consequences of their adversary's attack. They had two main aims: to demand respect for laws and agreements, and to reinforce the solidarity of their ranks. The former, however, depended upon the regime. Beran approached Čepička, and in September 1948 Zápotocký, a Central Committee member, drew attention to the violation of laws and agreements and stated the

conditions for a renewal of negotiations. All in vain. The bishops did succeed in formulating a few measures leading to greater church unity: a memorandum from the episcopal conference of 15 August, addressed to the government, which was read in all churches; the introduction of St Mary's tithe; the revival of Catholic Action; the establishment of lay parish councils, eucharistic centres, etc., and strengthening of discipline and unity among the priests.

After the return of Archbishop Beran and some of the bishops from Rome at the end of 1948, the hierarchy stepped up its efforts to renew negotiations with the government. The party leaders learned from their own sources of information that, owing to the international situation, "the bishops had been advised to act in a conciliatory way and to try to achieve a reasonable agreement and thus postpone the conflict." The renewal of negotiations was on the agenda of the episcopal conferences in November and December 1948. According to reliable information received by Gottwald, only Beran decisively opposed negotiations. He refused to lead a delegation which was due to deliver a memorandum to the President. The content of the memorandum also became a matter of disagreement between Beran and Trochta. Finally, after some alterations, the conference approved the memorandum and elected Matocha, Trochta and Neczey as delegates.

The delegation visited the President on 19 January 1949. All the participants assured each other that they had no desire for conflict. Gottwald's reason was that he had "enough other worries", the bishops' reason was "the certainty of a political defeat" owing to "the State's power to do with them whatever it deemed fit, whenever it liked". The renewal of negotiations with the Commission for Religious Affairs was agreed upon. This agreement, however, was seen differently by each side. The bishops were trying to prove their sincere intention of respecting the government and its laws and not getting mixed up in politics, whereas Gottwald considered the church a centre of hostile elements. "The Vatican is the Vatican," he used to say, "and we cannot be sure whether there are any factions who would love to see a fight and might use some of the bishops as their instruments."

The bishops' visit directly affected the session of the Secretariat of the Central Committee. The Commission for Religious Affairs had already put forward further proposals concerning its church policy on 12 January: the law on priests' salaries, abolition of church schools, press, societies, etc. Their content reflected a spirit of conflict rather than agreement. The Secretariat of the Central Committee discussed the proposals on 21 January, but postponed a decision.

The memorandum which the bishops delivered to Gottwald actually contained demands formulated by the Commission for Religious Affairs in summer 1948. The Presidium of the Central Committee discussed it on

31 January and again on 7 February, stating that its approval depended on fulfilment of four conditions:

1) the bishops' oath of loyalty to the government;
2) revocation of the suspension of some progressive priests;
3) an end to discrimination against priests cooperating with the government;
4) suspension of priests convicted of anti-state activities.

A delegation of seven ministers was selected to represent the government at the forthcoming negotiations during which minutes were to be taken in such a way that they could be made public if required.

The Commission for Religious Affairs met on 17 February. The church was represented by three bishops. During the six-hour discussion, which was, at times, quite heated, it became obvious that church-state relations had worsened since summer 1948 and mutual mistrust had increased. The main speakers for the government, Čepička and Kopecký, said there must be either agreement or conflict and that choice lay entirely in the hands of the bishops. It was up to them to fulfil the four conditions. A compromise suggested by Minister Šrobár was to continue negotiations without any conditions and thus revive mutual trust leading ultimately and quite naturally to an oath of loyalty. Both Čepička and Kopecký resolutely refused. Čepička maintained the church must first change its attitude, which was already one of opposition. He made no secret of the fact that conflict would be the easiest solution for the government, and a tragic one for the church. Trochta repeated that the bishops had no interest in conflict and no doubts about its unfavourable outcome. Nonetheless, they were not negotiating out of fear. He argued:

> I am saying quite sincerely that I have no desire to fight or to be imprisoned or even hanged. . . However, I could be forced unwillingly to sacrifice myself, if it is a matter of higher things, such as religious freedom. Please realise, gentlemen, that there could not be anything easier for us than to sign a few lines about loyalty. That is more agreeable than facing other dangers. But when we consider this from a different angle, there are powerful internal and moral imperatives which cannot be ignored.

The six-hour discussion ended with an agreement that the episcopate would consider the possibility of fulfilling the stated conditions.

The session of the Commission for Religious Affairs was followed by a conference in the Archbishop's palace in Prague, where Beran and Trochta had two long discussions. Trochta was also invited to see the representative of the Papal legation, Sensi. Information about these conferences gave hope to the party leaders. The majority of the bishops, including Beran, did not express "any basic objections to acceptance of

the four conditions". Sensi supposedly reproached Trochta for having shown insufficient resolve. Nonetheless it was he, Trochta, who was given the task of composing a pastoral letter and working out a way of accepting the four conditions. Trochta was still optimistic about further negotiations with the government. He realised that most of the bishops were aware of the necessity for an agreement. Despite Beran's opposition, he decided to accept the conditions. The day before the opening of the episcopal conference he had discussions with Čepička as well as with Verolini, the diplomatic representative of the Vatican, and with Beran. According to the information supplied by the State Security, both Verolini and Beran reminded him of the instructions given to Bishop Matocha by the Vatican: in their dealings with the government, the united episcopate was to achieve advantages and postpone the final inevitable conflict.

The four conditions were on the agenda of the episcopal conference which took place on 22 and 23 March in Smokovec. No decision was taken. The conference was interrupted when it was discovered that the hall was bugged. The Minister of the Interior received a complaint instead of a resolution from Beran. His answer was an unconvincing statement that the bugging was the work of a western intelligence agency, probably the Vatican.

No further meeting of the Commission for Religious Affairs of the National Front took place. Those on either side who doubted the possibility of an agreement increased in strength: lower party functionaries, state security, priests sympathetic to the communists opposing the hierarchy. Čepička, who always believed that an agreement was impossible and that all negotiations were therefore useless, was their main speaker. Only Gottwald's instructions on reaching an agreement made him negotiate. Beran's distrust of a possible agreement gained ground among the hierarchy. Trochta alone was still mildly optimistic even as late as the middle of 1949.

On 25 April 1949, the Presidium of the Central Committee discussed Čepička's suggestions on further measures in church policy. They were inclined towards conflict, not openly anti-religious, but politically biased. At this primary stage it was a question of creating foundations for the birth of a national church. As Gottwald put it: "Our task is to provoke a political crisis among the clergy, and thus create hostility and conflict among them." He intended to unite the believers and the lower clergy against the Vatican and its faithful hierarchy.

The attack took place on two fronts: political and administrative. The political attack had three main aims:

1) to create a Catholic movement of priests and faithful desiring an agreement between church and state;

2) to emphasise the pan-Slavonic tradition of Sts Cyril and Methodius;*
3) to demand that religious services be conducted in the Czech and Slovak languages and not in Latin.

The aim of the administrative measures was to put the church under the legal control of the state. The following measures were to be taken: liquidation of religious associations, schools, press and all clerical activities other than those which were strictly religious; creation of a party network of local, district and regional officials responsible for church affairs, with the task of informing "on the church activity and secular life of priests". The Presidium of the Central Committee approved the accelerated implementation of the above proposals. A few members — notably Zápotocký — were not certain that the time was ripe for such an attack.

A series of administrative measures, most of them illegal, followed: disruption of established forms of communication between bishops and priests; an almost complete prohibition of church publications including episcopal circulars, etc. The Ministry of Education began to publish a *Journal of Catholic Clergy* (*Vestník katolického duchovenstva*) containing state instructions to priests as well as advertisements for vacancies. Public gatherings such as pilgrimages now required state permission, whereas previously they had been organised freely by the church. The State Security and the district and regional officials for church affairs increased their supervision of bishops and priests. Local functionaries informed on parish priests and the contents of their sermons. The number of priests imprisoned for fulfilling their pastoral duties increased.

Progress was also made on the political front. Propaganda against the Vatican and the hierarchy increased. The communists organised a campaign by believers demanding an agreement with the government even though the state had no interest in negotiations. Pressure was put on priests to sign similar petitions.

This propaganda went as far as conferences with those priests who supported communist policy within the church. Officially they were proclaimed to be progressive and patriotic, but in reality they were agents organising a communist faction within the church. At first there were only 12 of them. Besides supplying the communists with knowledge about the church which they had previously lacked, they were also active in other fields. At their first meeting, on 28 April, they enthusiastically accepted the Presidium's decision on church policy. Later they recommended the appointment of plenipotentiaries to the consistories and even requested the Vatican to recall Beran.

The church however put up resistance. The episcopate protested

*The communists tried to encourage believers to see their tradition as Eastern-rite thus linking their church with Russian Orthodoxy rather than with the Vatican.

individually and collectively against every instance of administrative repression, but in vain. Secret episcopal conferences frequently issued instructions to priests and sent letters to the state representatives. The most important were: Beran's letter of 29 April, addressed to Gottwald, about the involvement of State Security in the struggle against the church; and the episcopate's letter of 11 May and a subsequent memorandum addressed to the government, informing it of the episcopate's decision to revive negotiations on condition that the measures which severely limited the freedom of the church were lifted. (The party leadership ignored these communications.) Instructions issued to priests drew their attention to *agents-provocateurs* and the communist influence in some Catholic institutions.

The creation of Catholic Action — the name given by the communists to their so-called Catholic movement — sharply worsened the conflict. After its leadership had been formed on 10 June, preparations for the elections of regional and district committees began. The communist leadership instructed lower party functionaries to remember that the battle against the hierarchy was the first step in the struggle against "reaction", and ordered them to monitor the clergy's sermons and activities. Before 10 June, approximately 240 clergymen had been persuaded to sign a declaration concerning the desirability of an agreement between church and state. The press published the names of those who sympathised with the formation of Catholic Action. Then the state significantly increased the pressure and, consequently, the number of signatures increased. According to the information issued by the National Front, in one single week 16 per cent of all clergymen signed, 16.2 per cent gave their verbal consent and 11 per cent were categorically against.

The church responded decisively to this, the strongest attack so far on its unity. Shortly before the birth of Catholic Action, Beran, Verolini and three other bishops discussed sanctions to be imposed against priests who signed the proclamation and decided to excommunicate eight who would be holding positions of power. However, the "Church Six" learned of this and decided not to elect any priests as functionaries. The episcopate issued a pastoral letter on 15 June entitled "Message from Bishops and Auxiliaries to the Faithful in the Hour of Trial", which denounced Catholic Action as a schismatic movement whose organisers and followers deserved excommunication. Communist functionaries were instructed to prevent the priests from reading this letter out in churches. Those whose names had appeared in the press were summoned by their bishops, and many retracted their signatures, though this was not mentioned in the press. The clergy also issued a private declaration of loyalty to the bishops and in some dioceses they took a new oath of loyalty to the church and bishops. The campaign in Slovakia took the most

violent course. In some villages it came to the point of open confrontation between the armed forces and public functionaries on one side and the members of the church defending their parish priests on the other.

On 20 June the Holy See excommunicated all those who "knowingly and willingly participated" in Catholic Action. The bishops were not unanimous in their opinion of the usefulness of such extensive excommunication, or about the means of enforcing it. At a conference on 13 August they agreed not to excommunicate those who had been in any way pressurised into signing or who had signed only the declaration supporting the negotiations between the government and the episcopate. On the same day as the excommunication edict was issued, another decree issued by the Ministry of Education proclaimed invalid all politically motivated church punishments, e.g. the reprisals for collaboration with the state. The government issued a similar statement the following day. Yet again communist functionaries were ordered to prevent the reading of the excommunication edict from the pulpits. Priests who refused to obey were to be punished for political abuse of their office, while the deans who dealt with the excommunication of priests were to have their licences revoked and be tried in court.

The main targets of attack at this period were Beran and Verolini. Secret reports by State Security led the communist leaders to believe that these two were at the head of church resistance and they attempted to isolate them. Verolini's name was mentioned during the trial of the Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty, which gave the government a pretext to ask for his recall from Prague. As for Beran, a pretext was needed for a house search and the requisition of his office. To this end a provocation was organised in his cathedral on Corpus Christi Day.

Catholic Action was causing differences of opinion and shifting of positions on both sides. The majority of communist leaders had rejected at an early stage a sharply-formulated passage on church policy in Kopecký's speech for the Ninth Party Congress. However, Čepička persuaded Gottwald to retain it. More serious was Plojhar's wavering: having experienced ten days of pressure by Catholic Action, he expressed his reservations and recommended negotiations with the episcopate who "have been pushed unnecessarily far, farther than we wanted". However, following discussions with Čepička, he rescinded this statement. The leadership of the Catholic People's Party, having accepted the first declaration which was unsatisfactory to the communists, now had to accept a new text. Four members voted against it.

Before 10 June, some bishops, under pressure from the authorities, temporarily accepted the view that an agreement with the government would be useful. The founding of Catholic Action, however, struck a blow against even the former optimists. They felt it was a treacherous

attack in view of their own efforts to reach an agreement. Some of them even expected a wave of persecution and arrests. Trochta wrote openly to Čepička, calling the formation of Catholic Action the greatest error which could have been made. He considered that the best solution would be to bury this unfortunate Catholic Action "which had already been connected with so much treachery, coercion and deception" as quickly as possible. In the final part of his letter he declared himself prepared for anything, even death if need be. His sentence: "Today I can do nothing more, nor do I want to," shows a complete collapse of his belief in the possibility of an agreement. The Catholic Action episode represented the most serious confrontation in church-state relations. It aimed not merely at putting political pressure on the episcopate but at replacing the episcopate in the negotiations with the government.

The first wave of signatures from priests and believers supporting Catholic Action gave Gottwald the impression that a successful start had been made. Later the flood ceased and some of the signatures were revoked. Finally, after the excommunications, there were doubts among the organisers of Catholic Action themselves, because "a suspended priest is no good to us." In September there was news of the collapse of district and regional committees. Financial help from the National Front could not stop the decline. And so, soon after its birth, Catholic Action began to die of inertia, a process which came to completion a few years later.

On the whole the balance was not in the communists' favour. They achieved none of their aims: Catholic Action became neither a broadly-based front of clergy and followers nor a new partner in negotiations with the government. It was unable to take over the role of the episcopate, to introduce religious services in Czech and Slovak or to revive the pan-Slavonic tradition of Sts Cyril and Methodius. Least of all could it form a national church. The differences of opinion and conflicts within the church did not amount to a political crisis of the size desired by Gottwald.

There were a number of reasons for this failure. In my opinion the main one was the communists' ignorance of their opponent. In their attack they used methods appropriate against another political party, as in the destruction of the Social Democratic and National Socialist parties. They imagined that the creation of discord in the ranks of the clergy would cause a collapse from within. They put too much trust in their "omnipotent" tactics. When Fierlinger mentioned to Gottwald the advisability of bribing one of the bishops to proclaim a national Church, Gottwald answered: "There would be no lack of bishops. But the church is not a political party. The real believers and priests are bound to it by ties much stronger than political interest: they are bound by faith, tradition, their attitudes to life and moral values. A politically motivated struggle is of little use against them."

Parts II and III to follow.