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Jan Hus, The Catholic Church and Ecumenism

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On July 6, 1990 is the 575th anniversary of Hus' death. This article is published to honor this great Christian.

During the Second Vatican Council, at the session concerning the Declaration of Religious Freedom, the late Cardinal Josef Beran caught the attention of the whole world. He illustrated how the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia suffers still today for what was the judgment on Jan Hus nearly 575 years ago.

Jan Hus, a philosopher, a priest-theologian, twice rector of Prague's Charles IV University, twice appointed synod's preacher, lived in an era of triple schism. He was called to the Council of Constance to explain his teaching and his ideas concerning the Catholic Church. Despite protection by the "gleit," a written guarantee of safe conduct to the council, at the council and departing from the council, he was thrown into prison, treated as a criminal, and was condemned by the council on July 6, 1415. That same day, he was burned to death at the stake. Hus died reciting the creed of the Catholic faith and praying for his torturers.

The Supreme Pontiff was absent, since John XXIII had fled, Gregory XII had abdicated, and Benedict XIII had refused to come to the Council of Constance.

Many articles have been appearing lately to make the historical figure of Jan Hus better understood. Professor Stefan Swiezawski, a Polish historian specializing in the philosophy of the 15th century and a member of the Vatican II committee for "Justice and Peace," called Jan Hus a precursor of Vatican II.

Followers of Cardinal Beran and Professor Swiezawski believe that if Hus were vindicated in the spirit of Vatican II, he could become a reconciling agent in his homeland.
of Czechoslovakia, on the continent of Europe, and even around the globe in the spirit of ecumenism.

To help in this vindication of Jan Hus, excerpts are presented from an article by Professor P. Karel Skalicky, written originally for the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in 1987.

According to the texts, Hus' dispute with the Council of Constance was concerned with fundamental questions about the Church: What is the Church? What is the substance of the Church? How can the Church be defined in the best way?

There were actually two conflicting concepts of the Church. The first concept, supported by the Council, understood the Church as Congregatio fidelium, that is, the congregation of the faithful. The second concept, supported by Hus and originated by Wycliffe, saw the Church as Universitas predestinatarum, the universality of the predestined people, which meant that all people were to be saved. The difference between these two concepts was of great consequence. The first one, a congregation of the faithful, was a tangible, concrete concept showing who is or who is not a believer. It is possible to find out quickly whether the person is baptized, whether he or she professes the faith of the Church and whether he or she communicates in a sacramental way. The second concept of the Church as the universality of the predestined people was, in contrast to the first, nebulous, indistinct, and almost ethereal. About whom is it possible to say with certainty that he or she is predestined by God for salvation? Consequently, by the first concept it is possible to establish Church law and Church organization; it is possible to build and to govern the community in the name of this concept and even to administer human society provided that the society is predominantly Christian. Of course, the danger of this concept is that it can become in its concreteness too worldly, too sociological, too legalistic, too limited by its own institutional structure, so that it is difficult for all non-Christians to be included, especially those of the Old Testament. Above all, one will be tempted to identify the institutional aspect of the Church with the kingdom of God. In this event, it will lose the eschatological view into the future in which the kingdom of God will be finally and fully accomplished.

The second concept of the Church, the Universality of the predestined people, is by comparison, much broader. It has this eschatological view, but it is again so spiritual, so abstract, so undefinable, that it is simply impossible to anchor in it any law. It is impossible to establish with this concept any functioning social institution. Consequently, the confrontation of these two concepts of the Church created an ideological "apple of discord" between Hus and the Council.

Of course, this account seems too academic and abstract without consideration of the whole sociological context in which the confrontation took place. This context especially gives to the whole confrontation an overpowering dramatic force, so that the question
which could and should have been the subject of theological discussions (the questio disputata) becomes without any exaggeration, a tragedy. In this context, Hus' argument gains significance. It becomes one among many conflicts of Christian nonconformist lay movements with the clerical-institutional structure. Many complaints already noted that his structure confiscated the Church for itself and that the Christian laity was made into an object of its "spiritual care". Of course, the lay people, who began to realize their own importance, did not want to be such objects. In their own way, they wished also to be apostles. They wanted also to share in Christ's liberation.

The first notable conflicts between laity and the clerical section of the Church were rising to the surface as early as the twelfth century. Valdensti (the Valdenians) were the most typical expression of this movement. There were many others during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For the most part, they were movements of Christian inspiration nourishing themselves mostly by reading the Scripture. There was, however, a non-Christian movement, called the Bogomils, with a gnostic-mani chean inspiration.

Qualitative change materialized when the intellectual clerics who were lecturing at the universities, started to join these movements. Wycliffe and, before him Occam and Marsilio of Padua, were the typical representatives of these new types of critical intellectuals. The conflict, growing in intensity, became so acute that the power of Church and State resorted to the use of force with the intention to "uproot the heresy." However, the heresy was not uprooted but went underground, and was secretly accumulating explosive material. Actually, the heresy was reinforced by the progressive deterioration of the power structure, described by its opponents with increasing frequency and emphasis as Antichrist or Behemot. Indeed, the ecclesiastic structure, at least to its perceptive representatives, was quite sincerely convinced about the necessity for its own reform.

There were both theoretical and practical efforts but without any results because to accomplish reform the ecclesiastic structure would have to give up its own power—which was humanly impossible. Therefore, all the efforts to bring about a "smooth," "painless" reform ended without any success. Though well meant, the attempts were ineffective, and the situation proved to be as insoluble as the squaring of a circle. Thus, the development hastened without restraint toward the explosive, catastrophic solution which arrived only a hundred years after Hus, when the split of Western Christianity started with Luther and was followed by a sea of blood and tears.

Within this framework of deep crisis, Hus' confrontation with the Council was taking place not only as a theological dispute but as a spark igniting a charge, as a provocation chosen by Hus, who was ready to go to extremes even at the price of his own life. Understandably, some critics ascribe to Hus an unhealthy desire for martyrdom. Who knows whether it was healthy or unhealthy? In any case, it led to a gesture, to an act which was
multilayered and multisignificant. Only our intellectual concepts have single meanings. For this reason, an act is liable to become a symbol. The Council, as if it anticipated significance, saw to it that Hus' ashes were washed away by water. In this way the Council hoped his memory would be completely obliterated. The Council did not realize that a symbol can not be washed away by any amount of water. Indeed, Hus became a symbol—understandably of many meanings and just because of this multiplicity of meanings one can read into the symbol whatever one likes. Protestants see in Hus a precursor to Luther's Sola Scriptura. Humanists see a hero, who did not recoil even when he faced the flames of the stake. Free-thinkers see in him a defender of freedom of conscience. Marxists see a revolutionary against the feudal ecclesiastic oppression. Only the Catholics in most cases do not know what position to take. Some even insist that it is a matter of the past which may be better not to remember.

However, if Hus should be of value to anyone, it should be precisely to the Catholics. What Hus wanted so much that he was ready to sacrifice even his own life, was precisely the renewal of the Catholic Church. True, Hus was mistaken when he thought Wycliffe's definition of the Church was suitable for this renewal. For that matter, the followers of Hus forgot about Wycliffe's concept. In this instance, the Council by their refusal of Wycliffe's definition, supported orthodoxy. For that we can be grateful to the council. Yet by Hus' condemnation, by reversal of his priestly ordination, by burning him at the stake and by throwing his ashes into the river, the Council did not provide a good service for orthopraxis. In any case, the Church should not condemn people, but only heresies. People should not be burned at the stake for mistaken definitions of the Church in a normal society. And, if they are burned at the stake, then it is a sign that the society is not normal, let alone Christian, and this body of human beings needs a thorough shakeup to awaken and to focus clearly.

In any case, the Council was not guided by pastoral wisdom and prudence. As evidence, observe how the situation developed further. The Council of Constance acted in Hus' case from a position of strength and power. Yet the Council in Basel had to treat Hus' followers as their equals, as equally orthodox Catholics. The Husites themselves demanded a dialogue based exclusively on the Scripture and on the praxis of the early Church. Modifying these conditions, the Council at last accepted them. Yet the Pope again cancelled them. It is no wonder that the next Council, this time in Trent, had no one to talk to, because this whole large segment of Christendom could not take the Council seriously. This state of affairs had continued to the present. And one can not put the whole blame on Luther.

It is a great pity that there was not an influential man at the Council of Constance who would have had such wisdom as Rabbi Gamaliel, long ago. At that time, when the Sanhedrin wanted to condemn the apostles for heresy, Gamaliel told them: "Leave these people alone and release them. If this intention and this work comes from people, it will fall apart by
itself; if it comes from God, you will not be able to annihilate these people." (Acts 5:38-39.)

Well then, who was Jan Hus in this perspective? Was he a warning signal of God or a prophet in his own way whose warning the authorities decided to extinguish quickly, perhaps because they saw the danger to the status quo? It is difficult indeed to say by what Spirit they were guided. After the execution of Hus, this was actually the comment in the letter of protest written by four hundred and fifty-two members of the Czech and Moravian aristocracy—quite a noteworthy number of the People of God. But no attention was paid to this protest and the letter was burned. And since all good and bad things come in threes, even Master Jeronym was burned to death. The result was terrible so that even today the aftermath lies heavily on us, but without these sacrifices the process purifying the Catholic Church, would not have taken place today.

As far as Hus' originality of ideas is concerned, scholars have debated Hus' dependence on Wycliffe. For example, Hus referred to the Church as Universitas Predestinatorum, a definition from Wycliffe. Although Losert, an expert on Wycliffe's works, alleged, that Hus merely copied Wycliffe, Sedlak studied all of Hus' citations of Wycliffe. To his surprise, he discovered that Hus accepted some ideas, and criticized others. In many instances he modified Wycliffe's formulations, especially where they seemed to be too far from orthodoxy. In general, Hus' ideas were more moderate, and related more to pastoral theology than to academic theory. An illustration of his original genius is found in "The Little Daughter," the writing which Paul de Vooght values most among Hus' works.

The question has been raised: how is Hus' teaching perceived within the ecumenical community today? The answer is, Hus' teaching does not pose a serious problem; it is rather Hus himself, or even more Hus as a symbol, which causes the difficulties. Especially Hus' tragic case has a traumatic and divisive character. It confronts a person unavoidably with a difficult dilemma, either-or: either Hus was a criminal and it was correct that he was executed and those who have been taking up his side should end up in a similar way; or the Council was criminal and then it is necessary to disassociate from such an assembly in a most decisive way. For this reason the event has had such a traumatic effect that even today, after so many years, the Czechs are unable to talk about Hus' tragedy without great grief.

It is interesting indeed that Hisites themselves resisted this dilemma tooth and nail and refused to accept it. They had their own opinions about the death by burning of their venerable Master of hallowed memory, but they considered themselves and wanted to be

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1Paul de Vooght, a Dutch Benedictine, studied Hus' writings directly in Prague. He pressed for Hus' rehabilitation because he concluded that after the Second Vatican Council, by the Church's stand, Jan Hus has been de facto vindicated even if not de jure. [Note by A. Moravec].
considered, in spite of everything, members of the one Catholic Church. In fact, they considered themselves to be better Catholics than those Catholics who were giving them the name of Husites with the intent of ridiculing them. By labelling them, the name-callers were writing them off as members of the Church and Hisites, considering their new "name" out of place, resisted it.

In contrast, the counterreformational Catholics drove this dilemma to the extreme. This was perhaps expressed most incredibility by a well-known polemicist, Cochleus. According to him, "Hus, with his stubborn heresy, sinned much more seriously than any adulterer, any incestuous person or even any sodomist, possibly any parricide and any infanticide even worse than Cyclops who were ferocious devourers of the human flesh." It is obvious that the demonization of an assumed adversary was carried in this case to the limit. Though this mentality has been overcome by now, nevertheless, there is still something surviving from it, especially among some Catholics and some priests. It is the Council which holds the truth for them, and this is understandable. Hus then can not be right and therefore his case is closed for them completely. But this approach is less understandable.

It is not necessary to see this case as black or white. On the one hand, one can become closer acquainted with the whole confusing mass of events during the council of Constance. On the other hand, one can think through the multiscinificant and multilayered meaning of the word truth. In the Gospel according to John, Caiaphas was right and fulfilled a prophecy when he condemned Jesus to death. The highest truth and the highest crime can sometimes go hand in hand. God allows it sometimes to happen so that we may learn to discern the spirits. That discernment in the Hus case is needed to the greatest degree. It is the core of the problem which Hus represents in today's ecumenical movement. The truth is: He died for the renewal of the Catholic Church.