"Dialogue" and "Coexistence" a Test-case from Czechoslovakia

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"DIALOGUE" AND "COEXISTENCE"
A TEST-CASE FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA

by Jaroslav Krejci

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In previous issues of OPREE there were two articles about the relationship between the church and the state in Czechoslovakia. One of these articles, by Professor Paul Bock (Vol. I, No. 2), covered the general ground and gave particular attention to the Protestant denominations, and the other, by Professor Josef Rabas (Vol. 2, No. 6), focused on the position of the Roman Catholic Church.

Although the relationship of the authorities to individual churches need not always be the same, there is no constant pattern in such variations. Immediately after the Communist takeover it was mainly the Catholic Church which, as a body with its head abroad, was exposed to the most oppressive measures. However, there also were small denominations whose memberships were especially stubborn in following a particular line, such as holding the Sabbath instead of Sunday (the Adventists) or refusing military service (Jehovah's Witnesses), and who bore the brunt of the punitive measures. During the Prague Spring (1968), and at the time of the Soviet invasion, quite a number of young Protestant ministers expressed their sympathies for the reform movement, and consequently were considered especially dangerous to the re-imposed Soviet-type regime. In the late seventies, several Protestant ministers became involved in the Charter '77 movement, which resulted in stricter state supervision of their churches (cf. P. Bock, OPREE, Vol. 1, No. 2

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With respect to the Catholic Church, the pressure also continued, especially on those priests who did not join the government-sponsored 'Union of Catholic Clergy Pacem in Terris of Czechoslovakia' (cf. J. Rabas, OPREE, Vol. 2, No. 6 [September 1982]).

There is a tendency to draw a sharp line between those who are willing to cooperate, whether sincerely or by lip service, and those who are not. This distinction is reminiscent of the position of the French clergy in the wake of the Great Revolution, where the main distinction was between those who made an oath to the Republic, which implied renouncing the allegiance to the Vatican, and those who refrained from doing so. What is most disturbing, however, is that the few very old members of religious orders are also exposed to harassment. These orders were dissolved soon after the Communist takeover in 1948, and the monks and nuns had to take up civilian professions. Only those (especially the nuns) who worked with handicapped people or did social work which no one else wanted to do were allowed to carry on with their jobs. There are only a few who remain---'Little Mothers of Calcutta' scattered all over the country---but even they are occasionally exposed to acts of brutality, as evidenced by a document which is attached to this note.

Reading this comment, which was sent abroad and published in the Czech emigré quarterly Studie, we have to ask ourselves how much these practices square with the climate of Marxist-Christian dialogue which is officially fostered on both sides of the iron curtain. Needless to say, the possibilities for such a dialogue are highly unsymmetric. From the West, both Christians and Marxists of whatever shade can take part; but from the East, only those who in one way or another show their allegiance to the regime are allowed to attend. I remember an episode which happened at the dawn of the big reform movement in Czechoslovakia. It was sometime in 1966 or 1967 when a Christian-Marxist dialogue took place in the West Bohemian spa of Marianske Lazne. Two young representatives of the main Christian Churches in Czechoslovakia, one Catholic and one Protestant (of the Czech Brethren Church), turned out spontaneously at this conference. They are not allowed to attend. They did not belong to that exclusive elite which is permitted to take part in the Christian-Marxist dialogue in the Marxist-dominated world. It has
to be stressed that this happened in an atmosphere of thaw, when more liberal attitudes were already in the air. In the present situation, any participation in such a dialogue by someone who has not been carefully screened beforehand, is unthinkable.

Repressive Measures Against the Roman Catholic Church


On instructions of the District Procurator's Office in Plzeň of 10/27/81 in the afternoon, 43 policemen together with five women and two dogs entered the Caritas Home in Kadaň, district of Chomutov. The assembled Dominican nuns were informed that a house search would be carried out on one nun, because she had been in contact with father Dominik Duka of the Dominican order, who was arrested pending trial in Plzeň for alleged infraction of the law concerning state supervision of the church (para. 178 of the criminal code). The said sister stated that she was a laundress, that she had only laundered the habit of the priest concerned several times a year, that she had had no other dealings with him, nor had she written to him, or received any correspondence from him. She was unable to proffer any objectionable material, for she had none. Under this pretext a house search of the whole institution was instituted. The monastery has only two cellars, one for storing vegetables, the other for potatoes. But the police were mainly concerned with possible secret vaults, connecting the monastery with the town, and they tapped the walls in an effort to locate any such vaults: They were likewise not satisfied when they were told that the crypt beneath the church was 18C, insisting on it being opened and finding in it only three coffins. The search lasted on the first day until 6 p.m., and the next day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. A shocking experience for the sisters was the disrespect shown for their monastic seclusion. All prayer books found were confiscated. These included above all the Czech version of the breviary, in 10 volumes, and the Czech version of prayers for the mass. The sisters had duplicated the liturgical books confiscated by themselves, using the text approved by the Secretariat for Church Affairs and the duplicating had been reported to Caritas. Because there were 90 nuns in the house, average age 70, and most had these books, a total of about 800 were taken. The sisters begged the searchers to take their food, saying they would rather go hungry than lose these books, so precious for them, without which they could not pray with the whole church, which is their only comfort. They were told that at least they would be freed in this way from hang-overs from the past. Also confiscated were all writings, typewritten or duplicated, even of older date. Thirty-two typewriters were removed, only one was left. All night policemen kept watch in the sisters' corridors. In spite of the fact that they had taken from the sisters what was dearest to them, their means of spiritual communication with the church, these old women did not show any resentment, but gave them blankets in the corridor for the night, so as they should not be cold in the unheated corridors. They even boiled water and gave them hot tea.
At the same time a similar raid was carried out on a Caritas home in Moravec. Here, too, the police arrived in great numbers (about 100) in two buses with dogs, ambulance and doctor and equipment for illuminating the buildings. A very active role was played by the district church secretary, Dr. Belohoubeč. Here, too, the pretext was given by the fact that father Dominik Duka had an aunt here among the nuns and also corresponded with another several times a year. Since the sisters were likewise unable on this occasion to offer any anti-state material as requested, they underwent an extensive house search in all three separate buildings of the institution. The policemen gave themselves the run of the buildings, ignoring the legal regulation that any search should be carried out in the presence of the person whose possessions are being investigated. Where there were locked doors or cupboards or even suitcases in the attic, sometimes their locksmiths opened them, sometimes locks and even suitcase lids were broken. It even happened that the locksmith without the presence of the superior opened up her office and lodging, and the investigators took money and other valuables deposited here and photographed them. Before the arrival of the sister superior they put things quickly back in their place, locked up, and after showing this sister their warrant to carry out a search looked through her things again, as though they had not already done so. In Moravec, too, cyclostyled liturgical books were confiscated, all religious books, even those published during the First Republic, texts published by the theological faculty in Litomerice and even one book published by the state publishing house Československy spisovatel (Czechoslovak Writer). Confiscated, too, were handwritten notes of the sisters for their spiritual exercises, entirely private in nature, matters of conscience, for example. Finally, a new Latin breviary was taken, which had come as a gift of the Pope by the normal route. Confiscated objects were thrown in the attic into sacks, so that it is no longer possible to distinguish one person's belongings from another's.

The public in both places, Moravec and Kadan, were supplied the following false version of events in justification of the whole action: In both homes for superannuated spiritual persons six Poles were hiding in each of the cellars; there were also transmitters and "tubs" of gold. This gold was even valued at 12 million crowns although all it was was silver or gilt monstrances, chalices and ciboria worth 1% of the stated sum. The sisters had the necessary documents for these devotional objects, and they had been brought to the pensioners' home by the sisters from their various original communities, deprived of all valuables in the 1950s, as a last memento.

Evidence of the drastic nature of these two police raids is provided by the fact that in the course of the following three days three sisters at Kadan died. These are moreover citizens of this country, who devoted their whole lives into their late old age to the physically and mentally handicapped, incurably ill and retired fellow-citizens. Now they were deprived of confidence in their own personal safety in the Caritas homes and lost their most valuable possessions, their prayer-books.

A third raid was authorised by the district procurator in Most, JUDr Wohanka. On 10/29/81 six house searches were carried out and two
persons were taken into custody. A large number of printed texts were confiscated, mainly religious in content, including breviaries and equipment for the duplication of written texts.

After a house search at the vicarage in Lostka, district of Litomerice, the local administrator, Radim Hložánek, born 1/4/23, was taken into custody; he had been imprisoned at Valtice during the 1950s. It is not known of what he is accused.

At the same time Zdena Gálková (Galcová?), born 10/11/51, bookbinder in Most, was arrested and accused of pilfering of public property (para. 132 of the criminal code), allegedly because she bound religious samizdats for father Hložánek.

A further house search was carried out on Mr. and Mrs. Kostim (Kostih) in Most, who were supposed to have material searched for by the police, duplicating stencils.

At the house of Josef Nižňanský, church administrator in Bečov, father Hložánek's store was looked for. All typescript religious literature was confiscated, whether printed originally abroad or in Czechoslovakia. Neither the official stamp nor signature of the procurator was affixed on the search warrant.

No search warrant was given to Mr. and Mrs. Kocman, who live at the vicarage in Hoštka, only a receipt for the confiscation of about three books.

At the vicarage in Štětí all the administrator Ferdinand Plhal's living accommodation and associated outhouses including the hay-loft and dog kennel were searched. Copied or duplicated religious literature and catechetic material were confiscated. The administrator protested against the removal of a typewriter saying that it was needed for parish business.

Along with the judicial investigation of the case of six Moravian Catholics, dealt with in our report 273 (3), these actions of the police are evidence of the attempt to prevent all activity in the sphere of religious literature, terrorise believers for attempting to satisfy their justified needs, and finally criminalise individuals willing by their personal initiative to try to fill in the long gap in Czechoslovak church life.

11/26/81

NOTE

1 In order to preserve the authenticity of the document submitted by Professor Jaroslav Krejci minimal editing of the English version of the text by the editors of OPREE was carried out.