

The Struggle of the Czech Church: What We Can Learn from a Theological Analysis

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Forty-two difficult years of communism in Czechoslovakia revealed both our strengths and our weaknesses. They also showed that external activity is closely linked to inner preparation. Both heart and mind must be involved in the latter. If reason and intellect are absent, one sees the world in a one-sided way, and faithful, courageous and selfless Christians may become fanatics. Their activity is directed by emotion and instinct, they take irrational short cuts, they become aggressive and their spiritual energy-resource is hatred rather than love. Even if they have goodwill, their activity is counter-productive. At the other extreme, however, we find those whose minds are not trained in a Christian sense. They may know everything about a given situation, but this means nothing if they have no deep motives for their activity, if they are not offering a sacrifice for the sake of Christ. We have heard some very clever individuals, priests and bishops among them, trying to justify their false attitudes with moral arguments presented in a rational manner. In reality, however, they were simply not brave enough, and their lack of courage led them into opportunism and collaboration to the extent, in some cases, that they betrayed their priesthood.

At times of great upheaval and danger one needs above all else to be able to get one's bearings: to be able to understand at least to some extent what is in fact happening and why, what is to be expected next, and what the point of it all is. What is needed is a clear statement which will avoid empty words of comfort but also inspire confidence.

In 1951 an anonymous document entitled *A Note On The Times We Live In* began to circulate secretly in Czechoslovakia. This was a theological and spiritual analysis of the situation with practical suggestions about how to conduct oneself in a police state. The basic thesis was that any age, even an evil age, is God's age, challenging us here and now to live a meaningful life by serving God faithfully, loving our fellow-men, being prepared to suffer and thus making preparations for the future of the church on earth. It is marvellous

what a powerful source of light and courage that text was at the time.

During the long years which followed many of us were in prisons and labour camps, while all other faithful believers lived under oppression and persecution. Friends from the free world helped us greatly during this period. May God reward them and their churches for this fraternal service. Some of these friends stated openly that they in their turn were learning valuable spiritual lessons from us. Now it seems that we are again in a position to offer the West a gift in return: our experiences and the lessons we have learned from them, which are valid not only for us but for the Universal Church as well.

The Church in the State

Our experience has shown us that if we fail fully to comprehend a new situation we can easily make mental short-cuts and then act in the wrong way. In such circumstances the irrational ego in us gains the upper hand. A hostile attitude towards us, for example, naturally evokes the same instinctive response in us; an aggressive attitude mobilises us to be aggressive back. But is this Christian? Is it rational? Is it sensible or useful?

A persecuted church has to have a clear understanding of the state's real attitude towards it. The following typology may be of some help here:

A) A friendly attitude: the church's existence is approved of; the church is needed and protected. A state church, either dependent on its own resources or enjoying privileges.

B) A neutral attitude: the church may exist, but there is no need for it to do so. An independent church, separated from the state, enjoying freedom.

C) A disapproving attitude: it would be better if the church did not exist; it is merely tolerated. A marginalised church, suffering discrimination.

D) A hostile attitude: the church ought not to exist. Two variants: 1) a threatened church, which is systematically repressed; 2) a dying church, which is powerless and without future prospects.

In our country the communist regime started out with an attitude which was apparently neutral (type B), and which indeed had certain 'friendly' characteristics (type A): after his election Gottwald, the first 'Worker-President' and also leader of the Communist Party, asked

Cardinal Beran of Prague for a *Te Deum* in the Cathedral. The aim was to win over the clergy by flattery: the contribution made by the ordinary clergy to the national awakening in the past was emphasised. Just one year later, however, there could no longer be any doubt that the church had fallen under the communist yoke and from now on was going to be able to lead only a very restricted and closely supervised existence (type C).

The harsh truth finally became apparent in the wake of the liquidation of the hierarchy, the religious orders and all the church's institutions and pastoral resources, which was carried out shortly afterwards. Hysterical anti-religious and anti-church propaganda, accompanied by practical measures of various kinds and the increasing use of criminal proceedings, made it clear that there was just one solution to the problem of religious faith and the church: their extinction (type D). The authorities began to work systematically towards this goal. Again and again they proclaimed their intention to 'liberate from superstition those citizens who are still religious believers and bring them to a scientific world-view'. This remained their aim right up until 17 November 1989.

During the 'Prague Spring' of 1968 there was an attempt by the communist reformers to give the church a free space in which to live (or perhaps die). The relationship was thus abruptly boosted to one of neutrality (type B) — although results were slow in coming, partly because the current legislation on religion was still of type C. The years of 'normalisation' which followed saw a reversion to the pre-1968 situation, with only negligible and residual 'Spring' characteristics (type D/C).

After all these experiences, what kind of church-state relations would we regard as desirable? Those described in the 1988 petition signed by 600,000 Catholics: normal civic rights, without privileges or discrimination; open, friendly and cooperative relations — in other words, neutrality.

Dangers which Threaten

Let me start by making a universally valid statement. Any church — just like any living organism — is under threat either from within or from without. The former is not necessarily dependent on the latter, and can be much more serious.

From Within

There is one threat in particular which remains in our church's historical memory: the wave of Enlightenment and the religious

policies of the Emperor Josef II in the Austrian Empire. On the one hand the church received the support of the Emperor — many new parishes were set up, for example — but on the other hand all contemplative monastic houses were dissolved, and many others too, and priests were trained to act as servants of the state rather than to involve themselves in educating ordinary people about how to live as Christians. On the theological syllabus Dogmatics were neglected and the faith was explained rationally and evaluated from a utilitarian point of view even by humanitarian and noble priests like Bernard Bolzano. Decades had to elapse before the rebirth of genuine Christianity on a theological and spiritual basis could be successfully promoted, by individuals of profound faith like Klemens Hofbauer. Refreshed at this spring, and with renewed inner strength, our church was able to resist external oppression after 1918 and to continue to grow spiritually.

As always at times of severe trial, the priests who failed the test were those whose faith and life, as well as their relation to the church, had flaws in them. Similarly the faith of the laity was poorly equipped to survive 'carrot and stick' techniques, rooted as it was in the family and in the popular church, and only weakly in tradition, and lacking any profound commitment to Christ and the church of the kind which grows out of crisis, or any fidelity of the kind which is won through prayer.

From Without

The most powerful external enemy, although not the only one, is the state. In the past the Austrian monarchy, following 'Enlightenment' principles, tried to use the church as an ideological foundation, as a kind of adult educational establishment. Under the liberal First Czechoslovak Republic (from 1918) the church was not separated from the state, and received financial support under conditions of not entirely amicable neutrality — various groups such as the freethinkers, the socialists and the communists adopted an aggressive stance towards it.

What happened in 1948 was something quite new, known only to some extent from reports from the Soviet Union. The authorities, applying totalitarian control and comprehensive supervision, began to eradicate any alternatives in the political, economic and also ideological spheres. Those who allowed themselves to be 'taken over' gained material opportunities, but at the price of losing their human self-respect. The church was rendered completely powerless, and only one prospect was envisaged for it: extinction. Meanwhile it was generously offered the opportunity to help in the construction of socialism.

At the outset, even those Christians who had proved themselves in

earlier conflicts found it difficult to get their bearings. None of the civilised rules of politics or of spiritual competition were valid any more. The clenched fist of the Revolution, if need be wearing a glove of lies, was aiming only at effecting the will of the Party.

It was only gradually that people began to realise that no power is total power. In the first place, although the authorities may have definitive plans, they sometimes lack the resources or favourable circumstances to carry them out. The job of realising aims is often given to people who are not prepared to perpetrate injustices. One example: prison guards who had been indoctrinated about their enemies had opportunities to become personally acquainted with 'criminal' priests and believers, and sometimes ended up helping them. Secondly, the success of any enterprise depends on the resistance of the raw material — in this case, the believers. As they began to see how the Marxist doctrine of the primacy of matter was coming to grief on their fidelity to their faith, they became more and more calm and self-confident.

Tactics

Following the Soviet example, our communists wanted to move against the church from without and within simultaneously. They therefore targeted the hierarchy and pastoral work; but also, and more energetically, the faith and Christian morality. It would after all be simpler to destroy the people's faith: the church would then simply become redundant.

They used three basic tactics.

i) Indirect action.

A general rule for achieving one's goal is that the maximum possible effect should be achieved with the minimum possible effort. Every strategist's dream is to defeat the enemy without firing a single shot. In the case we are looking at, this would be self-liquidation by the church: spiritual bankruptcy, collapse of structures, dispersal of the flock. The powers that be are not much interested in isolated individuals who do nothing to attract attention to themselves. Besides the conservation of energy this scenario has another significant feature: from outside it looks as if no violence is involved. This was the spirit in which many members of the organisation of 'peace priests' acted: healthy respect for the terms of reference of the secular power combined with minimal activity in the cure of souls, 'for the sake of a quiet life'. Lay religious activists and secret priests were 'trouble-makers, harming the church'.

ii) *Direct action.*

Proponents of the radical solution prefer to apply various kinds of pressure and force. Indirect action seems to them to be too slow in showing results. Another reason for direct intervention is the church's vitality and ability to resist. Sometimes, however, the weapon turns against the secular power, and this gives the persecuted extra encouragement.

iii) *Paradoxical action.*

Instead of pressure, support is offered — but as an emergency solution when other tactics evoke too strong a defensive reaction. It is then a question of the state making timely concessions, not applying the usual sanctions, restoring a few rights, concluding agreements of no great importance and so on. The justification for this kind of step backwards is that it allows time to prepare for further steps forward in the future. The bill does not necessarily have to be paid, however, and what were meant as provisional improvements can take on a permanent character.

We have had to learn to tell different tactics apart and to avoid both despair and exaggerated hope.

There is a whole range of separate techniques of which full use can be made. Some of these are:

ideological warfare	intimidation
defamation	obstruction
disinformation	atomisation
gerontisation	schismatisation
isolation	instrumentation
discrimination	secularisation
surveillance	

It might be appropriate to end with a basic theological and moral question. What should a Christian's response be in this kind of difficult, even dangerous situation? Acceptance or rejection? The answer will depend on whether one sees a given situation as completely negative or not. If there is some good in it — and this can be the case even when the church is dying — then everything looks different.

When the threat comes from without there is of course always the danger of that ultimate evil, the collapse of the church. But at the same time things which are good and valuable are on offer: spiritual awareness that there is a choice 'either-or'; the purification of people's motives when they enter the service of the church; the intensification of life through faith. All this could well be enough to prevent one succumbing to the temptation of running away, either physically or

inwardly. As compensation for enduring under difficult circumstances, in the midst of torment and danger, one finds that one's spiritual resources are strengthened and mobilised. It is easier under these circumstances to reach a higher level of human worth than one usually has the opportunity to do in everyday life. An individual Christian as well as a church can therefore struggle for religious freedom and at the same time mature through suffering towards sanctity.

When the threat comes from within, however, the situation can be more dangerous, if the church is not alert to the need for effective defensive measures.

Warding off the Dangers

The existence of the church is not something which should just be taken for granted. Many believers have the wrong idea about the church, that it is God's affair, and that they have done their duty simply by not leaving it. It is up to God to look after his own vineyard.

The church is in fact the gift of God, and the church is also our task — to the extent that it might even perish through our fault. God is perfectly capable of allowing that to happen: in the course of history many sections of the church have died out. In today's gigantic struggle for the soul of humanity, which in many respects dwarfs the spiritual struggles of the past, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that this or that particular church in this or that particular part of the world will somehow automatically endure and survive. Every Christian in the world has to join in the struggle to avert the threat of godless 'horizontalism', no matter whether this springs from Voltaire or from Marx. But the first priority is to declare war on one's own lukewarm apathy: this is what represents the mortal danger.

Specifically Christian Defensive Measures

All morally acceptable measures are available for us Christians to use: giving no support to hostile policies; taking negative and positive counter-measures; adapting ourselves to the situation; taking steps to alter it. But the substance of the church towers above what is merely natural and offers other methods which strike at the heart of the matter: it strengthens and develops religious faith, so that through inner tension this faith can also defend and even extend itself. Faith survives in the way that it lives. To sum up in slogans:

Life in God
Life in devotion
Life in hope
Life in truth
Life in love
Life in unity
Life in God's time.

All this will enable any church to find its bearings in times of trouble, whether it is oppressed or free. It is to accept every situation as sent by God, exploit any opportunities for the good, give thanks for everything that is of value, and read God's signs with great attention.

It is not always an easy matter to recognise or choose the right time for putting our various plans into action, so that we neither jump too soon nor allow favourable circumstances to slip by. Ideas, plans and also people must be allowed to mature — when it is not a case of risking something right away with no hesitation. And — last but not least — one must rely humbly on the guidance of God. Our experience convinces us that decisive and surprising impulses come from above.

To sum up. The life and survival of the church of Christ does not greatly depend on external freedom. It depends on inner vitality: on our faith, our hope and our love; on genuine life with God.

Note: this article is a condensed summary of Dr Madr's detailed study 'Jak církev neumírá' ('How a Church Avoids Death'), *Studie* No. 104-106, Rome, 1986.