

Editorial

The German Democratic Republic differed from all the other countries of Eastern Europe because it had no distinctive national identity. The only reason for its existence separate from the rest of Germany was an ideological one: its role was to embody the ideals of socialism. For many, until very recently, this still seemed a viable purpose. The Protestant Church had for many years assumed a measure of co-responsibility with the state for the welfare of citizens. The collapse of the old regime, when it came, was all the more shocking because until the second half of the 1980s the GDR had seemed the most successful and enlightened of the communist countries. Christians in the GDR were forced to ask themselves searching questions. Had they taken the right stance towards the authorities on the one hand and the protest movements on the other? Were there not even now positive features in the society of the GDR which should not lightly be thrown away in the rush towards unification? In this issue of *RCL*, Sabrina Ramet summarises the situation of the churches in the eastern part of Germany as they move into the new wider all-German context, and in three papers originally presented at the Ampleforth Conference 'A Time for Change' held in August 1990, (when the GDR was still in existence), three Christian leaders raise and try to answer some of the many questions confronting the churches about their role and conduct in these last few critical years.

One of the most urgent questions associated with the end of communism in Eastern Europe is that of the rediscovery of authentic identity, both national and individual. The goal of communist education was to lead something called the 'proletariat' towards a future 'paradise on earth'. In the end, everybody knew that the former was a fiction and the latter an illusion, but this was of little consequence to the authorities: sufficient that alternative programmes should be denied serious discussion. One important element in the official policy was retrospective rewriting of history in the light of present (and future) 'reality', and the suppression of other versions. Thus the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were cut off from their heritage.

A creative minority in the population has however always known that it is crucial not to lose this heritage if human dignity is to be preserved. What is involved is a conscious task of imaginative and spiritual recreation; and this is a task for artists, poets, writers and religious believers. It is the task known in the Christian liturgy as *anamnesis*: not simply remembering, recalling, but re-calling, calling back; in the words of Gregory Dix, the historian of liturgy, 're-presenting before God an event in the past, so that it becomes here and now operative by its effects'.

The article by Petr Piřha in this issue of *RCL* is an act of *anamnesis*. It is part of the final chapter of his unpublished book *Bohemia and Her Saints*. The Czech lands of Czechoslovakia (Bohemia and Moravia) have long been considered one of the most secularised parts of Europe, and the Piřha testimony is important because it provides a counterbalance to this view. But it is also important because it is an act of spiritual rediscovery, of re-creation, of the kind which is going to be increasingly important in post-communist Europe if zoological chauvinism and secular nationalism are to be transcended.

In the introduction to his book Piřha writes that 'it originated in the basis of my own meditations on the Czech saints and offers the reader a view, certainly a very subjective one, of Czech history. It is first of all a book on my own search for a national consciousness and self confidence, on the position of Bohemia, the importance of its culture, its history.' The author recognises that there are likely to be factual errors because he did not have access to archives. However, the book is not intended as a reference work or as a piece of scientific research. 'I would like to beg especially all experts not to approach this book as a text they are to joust with and unseat, but far rather as a man they are to meet.'

The book is, then, Piřha's personal encounter with the saints of Bohemia. He believes this kind of encounter to be of existential importance. For when those we love die, says Piřha, they start to live on in us: we find ourselves bodying forth their words and examples. 'Let us take upon ourselves the tasks entrusted to [the saints] and thus take up our heritage.' 'Whenever we consider traditions, we are really considering ourselves. . . Tradition is the depth that gives individuals, families and nations their significance. . . Tradition is always bound up with hope. We do not reach for it as for a dead inherited jewel to adorn an impoverished present and give us apparent importance. We reach for it as for a challenge. . . and so find our task for now and the future.'