

## THE CZECH REPUBLIC - PROBLEMS OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION TEN YEARS AFTER THE VELVET REVOLUTION.

by Janice Broun

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During three visits to Czechoslovakia prior to the Velvet Revolution, I discovered an immense avidity for theological education among young Christians. What my young medical student friend Kate Radl longed to do was to be allowed to study theology. "We go swimming with Fr. Zverina," she said cryptically, "and to Bulgaria for holidays with him..." What did they discuss when they were in the water, safe from bugs? Jozef Zverina was a banned priest who had survived prison sentences of over 15 years, as had another of my contacts, Dr. Oto Madr.

For Catholics at that time, only two seminaries were available. Litomerice had to serve both Bohemia and Moravia; Bratislava served the traditionally more religious Slovakia. Both were heavily infiltrated, with students kept under strict surveillance not only in term time but even in vacations. They were kept isolated from access to theological developments in the wider world. Their teachers were second rate men, approved by and obedient to the ubiquitous State Office for Religious Affairs. The atmosphere was conformist and depressing. Graduates from other faculties were excluded. Intelligent men who felt they had vocations usually opted to join clandestine religious orders to get quality teachers like Zverina and Madr, and for the close mutual support to be found in very small groups. The first member of the Radl family I met in 1984, was Tomas, a building engineer, who was a secret Salesian. In 1990 his father Vladimir (Vlada) Radl, a doctor of medicine who also taught philosophy and religion in the underground, told me that Tomas had not informed him of his ordination until six months after the fact, or of the death threat from the secret police (STB) he had found over the fireplace of the country cottage he and his friends used. One of these friends, Libor Ovecka, taught in the economics department- "a safe subject!" of Prague University.

On my latest visit, I found Tomas, a quiet, serene, relaxed personality, now director of the lively Salesian St.Vojtech youth centre in the Budweiser city of Ceske Budejovice, in South Bohemia, where he is responsible for the spiritual training of the novices. Libor, warm and dynamic, is now founder and director of the Jabok Academy in Prague, a stimulating experiment which combines theological and social education. Mikhail Semin, former dissident and agnostic, directs the Obcansky (Citizen's) Institute in Prague's Emmaus Centre, the former Benedictine abbey. I also spoke with Prague's assistant bishop, Vaclav Maly; with my old friend Madr; with two of Tomas's assistants, diocesan youth Secretary Jana Bruskova, an attractive young woman who had worked as an *au pair* in London and with the interdenominational Youth With A Mission in Ireland, and Vendula Grubhofferova, a very bright schoolgirl baptised only four years ago. Her parents are atheists but her grandmother is a believer. My conversations with these diverse but committed people shed light on a number of the tensions and problems wracking the Czech Catholic church today. By letter, George Novotny, an elderly Slovak Jesuit priest who now teaches at Olomouc in Moravia supplied me with information about theological education there. Although I cannot provide a comprehensive picture of Czech higher religious education, I gained enough information to comment on the situation and to draw some conclusions.

### **Current Status of Clergy and Monastics**

As a result of the *numerus clausus* operated by the communists, about a third of the Czech Republic's 3131 parishes were left without a priest of their own. Bohemia, still largely rural, is regarded by Catholics as the most deeply secularised province in Europe. The isolation was such that many parish priests broke down, often resorting to alcohol or sex. Now that each diocese has its own seminary, by 1997 about half of the parishes - 1693 to be accurate - had priests. However the average age of a Czech priest today is 69. Jana Bruskova lamented, "Our priests are old, dying ...Our bishop calls in 13-16 Polish priests who are a help but were brought up in a very different society from ours." Kate Radl was critical of the seemingly arbitrary system of placing and moving priests, who are often not given long enough in one parish and transferred even when they are proving really effective. Inexperienced new priests are too often sent to villages where the

atmosphere is discouraging.

Both Vlada and Tomas believed the only realistic answer would be to run groups of parishes with small communities, ideally of members of orders who would provide mutual support. The 651 priests in orders find themselves in an invidious position; now in theory able to devote themselves to their own more specialised spheres of ministry, in practice they are under continuous pressure from the local bishops to work in parishes. Tomas apologised to me for not being around at St. Vojtech on the Sunday I was there-he was standing in twice a month for a mentally sick priest - "We serve a useful purpose, but it isn't right; our work here is with children." There is a gap in understanding between secular and religious clergy he told me, and it is accentuated by the fact that most of the religious are relatively young and well qualified in other professions. Libor said the same. Prague Salesians had been asked to take back a parish whose presbytery they owned, to relieve an old, sick Jesuit. "But if we did, we'd be neglecting our own work with street kids with all sorts of problems and with running our school here." Not all orders are as adaptable as the Salesians and Dominicans. Libor said that most of the Jesuits who survived communism had had to become parish priests -"which is not the mission of a Jesuit! Even those who were sent abroad for further study after the revolution mostly found it too difficult to adjust to the completely different ways of thinking." Most opted for Poland or Slovakia with their more traditional theology, rather than for West Germany, where he and a Salesian nun, Mireille, had studied. "It's sad, it was a chance for the Jesuit order and province to find new ways of thinking and living."

The atmosphere in Moravia, where society is still rather traditional and church-going still customary, is easier. Indicative of this was the fact that 170 of Ceske Budejovice's 200 lay theological faculty students come not from Bohemia but from Moravia, which has its own faculty at Olomouc. These are the main centres, along with Prague, where lay people can receive theological training, either full-time or part-time. Bishop Maly, whose experience in the underground church and as a Charter 77 spokesperson with the friendships formed thereby, have helped to make him the most open and far seeing of the bishops, admitted the crucial problem. On the one hand, following the upsurge of priestly vocations immediately after restrictions were relaxed, there is now a certain decline. On the other hand, "although many people, both men and

women, want to study theology, there is no space, the church's financial resources are very limited and they can't be paid. It is a tendentious question, but I believe we need more theologically educated laymen." Yet the church can only offer a limited number of openings for lay workers and they are not paid enough to support families. Interestingly, Bishop Maly, like Dr Madr, had been adamant in his condemnation of the church prioritising the restitution of its property, as it gave a wrong image at a crucial time. Defenders of restitution argue however that the church needed the capital from property to put the church back on a firm financial basis.

### **Prague Theological Faculty**

The Prague Theological faculty has for several years been the centre of controversy. In the new era, it hadn't even found teaching posts for Fr Zverina (he has since died, in 1990) or Dr Madr or bright younger men like Salesian Josef Splichal, now teaching at Ceske Budejovice, high flier Tomas Halik, now a candidate to succeed Havel as president, and the indisputably controversial Odilo Stampach, who left for the Old Catholic church. Libor joked that the Prague Faculty was "still an island of nineteenth century, or even medieval, theology." The Institute's philosophical journal *Distance*, based on Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, is regarded by more traditionalist Catholics as a bastion against the rapid encroachment of modern and postmodern pluralism. An offshoot of the Institute in Pilsen, western Bohemia, follows a similar line. Almost every one with whom I have spoken during my visits regarded it as a stronghold of reaction, still dominated by its communist-era lecturers. Vlada's request, as an interested layman, to sit in on a lecture on medical bio-ethics by a leading American Jesuit had been rejected by the former Dean, Dr Wolf, as "impossible!" It was for priests and seminarians only!

Bishop Maly deplored the Prague faculty's failure to provide a normal full-time theological curriculum, as opposed to a part-time course. (Kate, now mother of six children, had taken this week-ends course before she started full-time work in the national endocrinology institute.) Libor Ovecká berated Prague University, its Catholic faculty and his bishops in general for allowing this course to continue. "Its students are deceived. It isn't possible to have a proper study of theology in this way. You need 30 hours study weekly. They aren't even required to produce a thesis. It lowers the level of

theological education in our country." The extra-mural courses at Ceske Budejovice and Olomouc, Libor said, were better grounded than that at Prague.

Mikhail Semin put quite another angle on the dispute. After disillusionment with what he experienced of his church in the west he had a deep spiritual experience at a Latin mass and is now a member of the Tridentine '*Una Voce*' movement, which is understandably rather thin on the ground there, with around a few hundred members, and which is denounced by the bishops, especially by Maly. Semin believes that many believers would sympathise with and possibly opt for the old mass if *Una Voce* were allowed to publicise it. He described the current Dean, Jaroslav Polc, who has lived in the USA, as "a *via media* diplomat". Despite slight changes "the faculty is still conservative, though Cardinal Vlk, its Chancellor, a man who is very much into economics, inter-religious dialogue and the Focolare Movement, will probably try subtly to change things. He is antipathetic to tradition." He said that Prague seminary was now in the hands of more progressive elements, though not as progressive as those at Ceske Budejovice and Olomouc. Libor on the other hand said little had changed at Prague, Wolf is still Professor of Dogmatic Theology. In Semin's vocabulary, "progressive" has a negative connotation, so he is probably more representative of the general church outlook than the others I consulted.

Semin is a proponent of 'home-schools' - an interesting parallel with some more fundamentalist western Christians families who also seek to provide a stable Christian and moral basis for their children by preventing them from being contaminated by the all pervasive secularism of state education and society. Vlada regards these 'home schools' as very beneficial, but few Czech families choose this demanding option. His oldest daughter Marie, trained as a speech therapist, and her husband educate their four adopted children. Their two daughters would have encountered problems in their original homes as children of unmarried mothers for Anna has a hare lip and the younger child is Roma. Anna is now a warm and confident teenager.

### **Theological Education for Laity**

When I expressed the view to Bishop Maly that the Protestants had addressed the problem of lay education better, he admitted that the Catholic church lacked a forum to

debate such vital issues, stressing that: "We must learn to discuss, read, provide open space for dialogue, for searching for the truth." But he reminded me that the high level of theological studies in the Protestant church was due to the fact that it was able under communism to maintain contact abroad, and keep in touch with current thinking, thus giving it continuity for studies which were ruled out for the Catholic church, "so we had to start from zero, only a few of the older theologically educated generation are left, though new ones are appearing."

Commenting on the clergy's failure to co-operate with the laity, he stressed traditional lay passivity. "For 40 years the church was limited to work within church buildings. Now, we must go outside. We must encourage co-operation between priest and laypeople, convince the latter they are co-responsible for the life of the church, that the church isn't here for itself, but for the world, for non-believers as well as believers. Changing thinking is a long process. Too many parishes are concentrated in on themselves. There are exceptions, but they are not typical. We need laypeople capable of leading gatherings, meetings, providing inspiration, supporting pastoral work. It'll need two generations. Thanks to God something is starting, one can be optimistic. But one needs patience, patience ....Our priority is to educate a new generation of leaders."

Jana Brusova said that all the bishops and the parish priests would also have to learn to accept and work with the newly trained lay people. "It takes time. There are problems when lay workers are put into a presbytery to help the priest and the priest doesn't want them there. It's very difficult when you get no encouragement, especially for a woman." She was fortunate in being a member of Hosin retreat house lay community, which organises camps, courses, drama and sport for youngsters and works with drug addicts, and she feels well supported. She emphasised the need for encouragement: "Czechs lack self-confidence. We need to help motivate people, show them their gifts." Vendula Grubhofferova confirmed this. She felt that Czechs have an inferiority complex about their distinctive culture and are too easily seduced by those of the big powers-first Russia, now the USA.

Fr. Novotny, now at Olomouc, has spent much of his life in exile in Canada. Some years ago he interpreted for me on two visits I made to the newly re-opened Eastern Rite seminary in Presov, Slovakia. When I told him how bishops and seminary

superiors had turned down a generous gift of libraries from German Catholics to fill their depleted shelves, on the grounds that their students would be contaminated by western theology, Kung et alia, he exclaimed "I wish they'd given us the chance to have it here!" The Faculty at Olomouc has had the advantage of having scholars like the Franciscan Petr Pospichal, rated highly by Madr, and the Dean of the Theological Faculty, Pavel Ambros, who, writes Novotny, "is very keen on developing it in all senses. 66 teachers, including laypeople and women, teach about 500 students, though the latest intake is a little down on last year's. A considerable variety of courses and several languages are provided for seminarians, the faculty of philosophy, for part-time students on weekend courses and for the more specialised charitable work activities." Ambros invites specialists from other universities, Novotny mentioned the lively Jonathan Sutton from Leeds University's prestigious Slavonic languages department, for a conference on the profound -and not strictly orthodox- nineteenth century Russian Orthodox thinker Vladimir Solovyev - a topic, one suspects, which the Prague faculty wouldn't touch with a barge pole!

### **The Obcansky Institute**

Both Semin's Obcansky Institute, founded in 1991, and Ovecka's Jabok are pioneering ventures. The Obcansky Institute is a private enterprise, a contemporary offshoot of the clandestine, flexible underground university of communist times, and a much needed corrective to the prevalent consumerist atmosphere. "It is not Catholic, though most of the lecturers are, but some of my colleagues are not believers. We stress the need for philosophy, theology, politics to be grounded in natural law and an objective moral order- a surprise for many in this era of inverted freedom. We try to teach how these apply. We provide an ongoing three day seminar twice a year on a Christian perspective in a free society, lectures, debates, a newsletter, a reading room, papers on social issues including the family and social security. Our seminars attract people who may not be Christian, though some who think through its implications are converted later." Semin, an astute analyst, is scathing about the government and national morality in general. "We are politically incorrect in the current Czech intellectual climate. Civil society needs to recognise God as its basis. Communism is still a psychological danger. It

is a sad comment on the moral situation of our nation that after so much persecution 230 of electors would vote Communist, they have actually doubled in popularity. They have never really lost power, especially financially. They have many contacts in the economic world which, though not necessarily communist themselves, are ready to assist them. Political life is sterile. People are dissatisfied with the current political elite. Klaus, our former Premier, carried out a socialist not a monetarist policy. His rhetoric and practise were in conflict. Privatisation did not really privatise. Banks redistributed wealth from one kind of communist to another. There is a parallel to the Slovak situation where you still see the Soviet hand. Society is basically consumerist, people overload their stomachs and their houses. If the western materialist perspective worked they'd vote for that!"

What worried me about the Institute, was that despite accepting Protestant students, Semin completely rejected co-operation with Protestant theologians, on the ground that the vast majority of Protestants do not accept the concept of natural law. He included even leading theologian Jakub Trojan, who had impressed me greatly in an interview on a previous visit, and in his book on underground debates (*And The Nightingales Sing*). This is in strong contrast to Ovecka's Jabok. Interestingly, Semin rated as "extreme" Dr Madr, whom I would rate as a fairly conservative theologian as well as a very wise person. Dr Madr himself wrung his hands as he deplored the every-widening gulf within his church between traditionalist and leftist-liberal elements. He does his utmost as editor of the prestigious journal *Teologike Texty*, to strike a via media - and gives space too for his Protestant friends, like Pavel Smetana, now President of the Evangelical Church. I remember him telling me (in 1984) how much more Christians could achieve in resisting Communism if Catholics and Protestants could forget their historical conflicts and work together.

### **Jabok Academy of Social Pedagogics and Theology**

In 1990 when we lived in Galloway, we had hosted Libor Ovecka, Josef Splichal and two nuns, including Mireille, during their first tour of the west. The Jabok Academy of Social Pedagogics and Theology, founded by the Salesians in 1992 was Libor's brain child after he and Mireille had studied in West Germany. It provides a unique course to train lay school leavers which adroitly gets round the Catholic church's lack of

enthusiasm, funds for subsidies and placements by co-operating with the Ministry of Education and the Protestant faculty of Prague's Charles University - not the Catholic one! The building belongs to the Protestant Cesky Bratr. The Ministry pays fees and running costs but not investment and development costs, which, sadly, Libor admits absorbs most of his time, fund raising, largely from churches abroad. He refuses to follow the prevailing trend for further education these days and go private, for many of the students come from poor or large or one parent families. "Private students are charged 50,000-60,000 kroner a year, ours pay 2000 kroners. If we went private we'd have to charge 25, 000 kroner. At present some of our students are so poor we don't charge them anything, 100 of them are subsidised by a special fund. Not all are Catholics and some are not even Christian." The three year course covers theology and biblical background; social work training and pedagogics. Most of them will go into secular social work and be paid by the state. They are trained especially for young people at risk: problem and marginalised youngsters, juvenile alcohol and drug addicts, young offenders, homeless youngsters and young prostitutes as well as physically and mentally handicapped people of all ages. Mireille concentrates on work involving the use of drama in their work.

Its unusual name, Jabok, is derived from "the river by whose banks Jacob struggled with God, and is also a play on the initials of Jan Bosco, founder of the Salesian order, and of the great Czech Protestant educationalist Jan Comenius - the institute was founded on the four hundredth anniversary of his birth. It provides a lay extension of the Salesian mission so as to reach people in a mostly unbelieving society with the word of God, especially the young, drug addicts, Roma, prisoners, people in places where priests never get. It provides social workers with a basic theological background to undergird their work." Though there are now 200 full time and 100 part time students, Libor tries to keep the atmosphere informal and intimate and avoid the impersonal atmosphere of some of the official church institutions. "We don't want it to get any bigger."

Were Jabok to be established as a full theological faculty it would lose its state subsidy. At present the bishops aren't interested in backing and funding it from the whole church. " So that our students can get a degree we have recently signed a contract with Charles University's Evangelical faculty, which runs a very similar social work and pedagogical course. This enables them to use all the university facilities and after taking

our final exams here they study at the university for further exams a few months later." Obviously, the composite course provided by Jabok is not equivalent to a straightforward degree in theology. Marie Kaplanova, my hostess, mentioned one of her many young contacts who found the theology Jabok offered as too superficial and left. But Dr Madr rates Libor, one of his old pupils, though on the extreme left, as "good and rare." With vocations for religious orders dropping catastrophically and even the Salesians only getting two new brothers per year, these and other initiatives outside strictly official church boundaries provide an invaluable way of keeping the church in some contact with the Czech people. Vendula Grubhofferova told me that almost all the young folk who gravitate towards the church in her city attend St.Vojtech, attracted by the sympathetic brothers at its youth centre, the soft drinks bar, computer room and games hall complete with climbing-wall, regular retreat-rambles - and, not least, by their life of prayer, which they do not neglect.

There is little doubt that Catholic educational work with laypeople in general is more advanced than that with seminarians and that educational and pastoral work conducted by the orders and individuals like Fr Semin is more imaginative than that provided by the dioceses or the Prague faculty. There seems to be a need for a wider vision and greater willingness to make changes than the episcopate and clergy as a whole are as yet willing to accept.

