

THE CZECH CATHOLIC CHURCH: RESTORATION OR RENEWAL?

By **Daniel DiDomizio**

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We looked forward to the new political system, to the economic possibilities back in 1989; we wanted the changes, but perhaps we did not realize what change would mean. We were naive. These were the sentiments of a Czech friend in the summer of 1995. As an English language instructor each summer since 1991, I have watched developments in the Czech Republic with fascination. I recall my impressions in June, 1991: the starkness of the gray, pockmarked buildings; the quiet warmth of the people, coupled with a tentativeness, a reflex perhaps from the then-recent past. "Freedom anxiety," someone has termed it.

But in the summer of 1996 Prague was a different world. The streets were bustling with tourists and local citizens. The facades of many buildings gleam thanks to a thorough cleaning or new paint job. Even the trams are decked out in colorful advertisements. Shops have opened, closed and opened again in the five years. One hears complaints about wages which barely keep up with the cost of living. Indeed in the national elections of June, 1996, voter backlash against the "privatization" policies of Prime Minister Klaus gave the ruling party a scare. Yet, most people admit to being better off, and spend more freely. Friends speak of vacations abroad, a very rare treat in 1991. Most of all people seem more confident about what is to come. Most agree, this is a good time.

And what of the status of the Catholic Church? Scaffolding, a common symbol of restoration in Prague, is particularly evident outside and inside churches. The lavish beauty of baroque and rococo captures the eye. Religion is no longer invisible. Religious men and women wearing habits are not an uncommon sight on the streets. In 1991 people spoke enthusiastically of the new religious energy found in movements such as the Charismatic Renewal and the Foculare.

Today churches are open, often refurbished and mostly empty. A poll taken in 1995 by the Catholic Church reported that 20% of the population considered themselves religious; 10% were identified as Catholic, of whom about half are active in the Church.

When I ask friends how the church is faring in this new era, the answers are as varied as the people themselves. Many point to the reopening of shrines and the public manifestations of devotion on special occasions. Restoration is a favorite word. Others are vague and less certain in their response. The clergy are largely over fifty years old; many know only the pastoral model imposed on the church during the communist era: the performance of the sacramental rituals and little else. One friend recounted that he routinely drives an eighty-year old priest between several churches for Sunday Masses. Reports of a sharp increase of seminarians throughout eastern Europe have not been true

of Czech Catholicism. In fact for most of forty years Czech communism suppressed religion to such an extent that few families were able to impart a solid religious formation to the young. Such an ambiance is hardly fertile soil for vocations to the religious life and priesthood. This is not Poland. Indeed some see the Church's efforts since 1989 as a struggle for survival, or at best an attempt at restoration. One senses an uncertainty in many church circles.

The contrast was striking when I wandered into the downtown church of Our Savior on a Thursday evening in June, 1996. A packed church of mostly university students participated enthusiastically at the Mass celebrated by Fr. Tomas Halik, professor of Philosophy and campus minister at Charles University. Sunday evenings were the same. The congregation listened to the homily with obvious attention and interest. Students crowded around Fr. Halik as he stood at the back of the church after the Mass greeting them. A Protestant friend remarked that Fr. Halik is successful in raising the existential questions of faith and meaning with these students. They experience the vitality of their faith in the midst of an increasingly secular world. An engineering professor spoke to me about a regular forum of Catholic intellectuals which meets under the auspices of the Ecumenical Institute of which Halik is the director.

How is the Catholic Church perceived by a largely secular Czech population? During a tour of the Prague Castle complex, a Czech university colleague pointed to the Archbishop's palace across from the President's mansion and commented, "Notice that the Archbishop's home is larger than the President's; this has been a problem throughout our history!" This analogy has found new meaning for many Czechs because of the three-year polemic regarding the restoration of church property. In 1993 the Catholic bishops requested that the government return to the Church not only churches and monasteries but also other properties such as farms, forests, even some small breweries which had once belonged to the church. The request was not unfounded. The bishops claimed that the income from these holdings is the only source of revenue to finance the costly repairs to damaged church buildings. Nevertheless the government refused the request, and some bitter exchanges have ensued the past four years.

Perhaps more significant than the official squabble has been the reaction of average Czech citizens to the Church's position. History has a way of being relived in this center of once Hapsburg Europe. People speak of the forced Catholicization of the Czech population in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War of the 17th century as if it had happened the previous year! One Catholic woman, a retired professor at the University, noted that many Czechs of her generation grew up associating baroque religious art with the Jesuit counter-reformation and the repression of the Czech people. There was still resentment, she recalled. Thus, while many Czechs admired the courage of some Catholic leaders who opposed communism in the past, little of that good will seems to have survived the events of the past five years.

This age-old tension between the Catholic Church and the Czech government erupted again in the spring of 1995 on the occasion of the now-famous visit of Pope John Paul II to canonize Jesuit Fr. Jan Sankander. Acclaimed as a Catholic 'martyr' of the bloody

Thirty Years War of the 17th century, in the eyes of many Czechs Sankander, a Pole, was branded a traitor to the Czech cause because he reportedly betrayed military secrets to the invading Catholic army. The reaction to the Pope's visit was immediate yet subtle enough not to transgress the characteristic Czech civility. Small crowds greeted the Pope's motorcade in Prague, and several important Protestant leaders failed to attend an ecumenical meeting which had been scheduled with the Pope. The incident was a regular conversation piece whenever I met Czech friends in the month of June. The fact that the Pope in a visit to Slovakia later in the summer apologized for the Catholic part in the violence of the 17th century did not seem to smooth the troubled waters.

Despite these tensions, I found Protestant/Catholic relations quite cordial at the level of clergy and laity. Protestants and Catholics share a common identity as Czechs and Christians and seem able to put aside official church stances which could drive a wedge between them. Christians are after all a small community amid the eleven million citizens of the Republic. Relations between us are good, said a pastor of the Czech Evangelical Church, despite the Sarkander episode. He then pulled out a colorful children's religious education text which he had authored and pointed with obvious pleasure to the title page containing the imprimatur of the Catholic auxiliary bishop of Prague. Several other Protestant pastors spoke warmly of their Catholic counterparts. The 15th century religious reformer Jan Hus remains a symbol of Czech national identity, often over against the Catholic Church. Yet when the nation celebrates this religious and national hero on July 6, both Catholics and Protestants frequently join together to commemorate the event. Catholics and Protestants cannot afford to remain fixated in the 15th or 17th century!

What then does the current religious restoration mean to Czech Catholics? Fr. Tomas Halik has spoken of the need to set aside the temptation to cling to a theology of suffering, the legacy of the previous era. He challenges Catholics to embrace the theological developments of the post-conciliar period and to engage in genuine dialog with Czech humanists with whom they formerly often found common cause. Fr. Michael, a leader in the Charismatic Renewal, spoke of the need for the conversion of the clergy and the youth. Young people must fall in love with Jesus, as he put it. Still other Catholics are encouraged by the return of devotional practices which they or their parents remember. They are less enthusiastic about the post-conciliar Catholicism of the West. Are these visions of the restoration of the Church compatible? Perhaps. But restoration is not always renewal.