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The Churches in the Czech Republic and the challenges of these turbulent times

The events of November 1989 and the collapse of the communist totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia opened, for the first time in over forty years, a broad range of options for action by the Church and by Christians in general. They brought major positive changes and new opportunities, but also problems and related challenges. Following the 'miracle year' of 1989, the Christian churches entered the new political landscape with a great moral track record. Their positive rating was down to the role they had played during the communist regime, when they were subject to great persecution but at the same time represented an understandable alternative to the prevailing Marxist ideology.

One of the things in the post-1989 period we can certainly describe as a considerable success, is the progress made in ecumenical contacts. For instance, a way forward was found through the divisions over Master Jan Hus, whose legacy was assessed objectively at a 1999 symposium in Rome by Church representatives and experts from different traditions and the secular world. At the symposium, the then Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) had asked upon the opening of the Holy Year 2000 for forgiveness for the suffering of the reformer Hus, who had been convicted in 1415 during the Council of Constance and burned at the stake, and also for the suffering of his followers. The Pope said: "Today, on the eve of the Great Jubilee, I feel bound to express my deep regret for the cruel death of Master Jan Hus and for the resulting wound, a source of conflict and division, that this created in the minds and hearts of the people of Bohemia."

Ecumenical aspects of reflection and further research on the significance of Master Jan Hus were also mirrored in early January 2000 in the joint statement of the then Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Miloslav Vlk (1932-2017), and the Synodal Senior of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Pavel Smetana (1937-2018), on the legacy of Jan Hus for Czech Christians. The Rome conference contributed to further recognition of shared views of the importance of Hus and to rapprochement beyond denominational boundaries, allowing coordinated preparation of the 600th anniversary of the death of Jan Hus in 2015.

In the relatively short space of a few decades, there was a sea change in perceptions of the importance of Jan Hus, with much of it shedding the potential for conflict and intransigence. This positive trend was affirmed most recently with the ecumenical commemoration of the legacy of Master Jan Hus on 15th June 2015 in the Vatican. Its

highlight was undoubtedly the meeting with Pope Francis. Alongside Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, among the participants were the senior representatives of the two non-Catholic Churches with largest membership: the Synodal Senior of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Joel Ruml (1953), and the Patriarch of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Tomáš Butta (1958). In his address to the Czech delegation the Pope said many disputes of the past must be re-evaluated against the new context in which we live. In the light of this approach, there is also a need to study without ideological bias the figure and the work of Jan Hus, for so long a subject for disagreement among Christians but now a motive for dialogue. The focus of Francis was also significant in his emphasis at the meeting on the need to work together in a joined-up way and in his affirmation of considerable openness to the non-Catholic churches.

In the Christian church, major areas of conflict emerged, however, after the political tide had turned. Soon after those revolutionary changes, images were rekindled of Catholicism as the enemy of progress and patriotism, images lingering in Czech collective consciousness through the works of 19th century liberal nationalist literature and nurtured during the First Republic and of course by Communist propaganda. The authority of the Catholic Church waned gradually but swiftly in Czech public life, and that still holds today. The relationship between society and the Catholic Church is undoubtedly one of the starkest areas of difference between the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries of Central Europe, especially Poland and Hungary. Yet they do have some tendencies in common. State and society in former Soviet bloc countries are in fact facing similar issues and challenges in the transition to non-authoritarian systems of order: the economic impact of transformation, building a new political culture, and the creation of space for democratic dialogue.

A common feature of post-communist central European states is the declining attractiveness of European Union membership. After 1989 and the fall of the Iron Curtain in the former communist bloc, the majority (and it was no different for us) spontaneously called for a "return to Europe". The tempting reason was that enticing dream of Western prosperity, the standard of living we could see beyond our borders. The refugee crisis, though, created a crucial watershed for the future of European integration, with differing ideas colliding and once again the East standing symbolically against the West. The refugee crisis signals growing risks to the economy and security, and at the same time it is broaching the topic of the defence of Christian values, especially in the post-communist East.

The Czech case is particularly interesting now because in such a highly secularised nation people began talking about Christian roots, admittedly mostly in terms of ideology. Proponents of the view that Christian and European values must be proclaimed and spread, do not even really know or define what values they have in mind. In the Czech Republic, faith has wilted and so we find under the banner of Christianity an ideology

driven by fear of the influence of Islam and other cultures. Typical opinions of church circles on refugees are a balancing act between solidarity and voiced fear of cultural fallout. One of the common causes of a crisis is the lack of a clear vision based on ideals. Today's European Union no longer relies so much on the persuasiveness of ideas, but solely on technocratic solutions. The weak authority of the European Union is often rightly associated with the lack of credibility of the leaders and their inability to engage in robust ideal-based reflection on the issues. In Czech society, however, there are other challenges that I would describe as Christian responses to the signs of the times.

In the younger generation, a new outlet has appeared for the "torrent of anger" from a section of the public and for dislike of the social elite: the social media networks on the Internet. These allow the frustrated and the angry to shout anonymously all their malice and reinforce each other in their negative worldview. In these murky waters, Czech populists fish for their followers and their ideal opportunity came with the immigration crisis of recent years. The populists have managed very often to turn understandable concerns into a hysteria of fear and hatred while posing as saviours. In recent times, through the social media, communications have become compartmentalised, generating filter bubbles that do not actually communicate with each other. These include communities sharing a meaningless or conspiratorial view of the world easily manipulated by cleverly disseminated propaganda masquerading as truth. In the communist era we had an information desert. Today we are in an information jungle. Yet the result is the same: disorientation, greater susceptibility to manipulation and distrust of everyone and everything. People get together in small virtual communities with the same shared world view, but do not communicate with other groups and, to exaggerate slightly, they live in parallel worlds.

In the current situation we see around us growing disintegration of the securities and interpersonal relationships we previously enjoyed and a withdrawal into 'communication ghettos' through new technologies, accompanied by a growing sense of fear and an increasingly aggressive tone of discussions which is in turn the catalyst for further divisive opinions in society. In this situation it is almost a question of survival to seek common interests that the members may articulate together, but with a European emphasis.

This fact is especially important today, where it seems that the whole project of European integration and the creation of formative models of unifying values are in jeopardy. The impact of the migration crisis and related cultural crisis on opinion trends is aiding the success of populist/nationalist movements throughout most of the "old continent".

I suspect the power of populism is related to the lack of faith in our society. By faith I mean something far deeper than just agreeing with dogmas or attending religious services. I am thinking of faith as a direction in life. Living faith is therapy for fear. Where there is little faith, there is much fear, and where there is much fear, there is much spiritual

blindness and aggressiveness, and where there is much spiritual blindness and aggressiveness, that is a gain for the demagogues who increase the fear exponentially, exploit the blindness and seek suitable targets to unload the "torrent of anger" - once they were the Jews, the Germans, then under the communist regime, the farmers and tradesmen, today they are the refugees and Muslims - and when the populist has properly fuelled fear and the feeling of being threatened, he presents himself as a saviour. That is why it is interesting to note how in our divided Czech society, the Catholic Church itself and its representatives struggle for direction. The church representatives are also incapable of speaking clearly about our membership of the EU. Above all, they criticise "neo-Marxist" tendencies in the gender debate and Europe's lack of cultural distinction. Some bishops therefore side with politicians who, as I said, profess Christian values but in reality, only use them as ideological ornaments, so that Christianity is only used as an ideology and is not part and parcel of spiritual identity. This is where many church dignitaries in the Czech Republic differ from Pope Francis, and so the views of believers are divided in their evaluation of the current Pontiff. Compared to his predecessors, Francis represents a turning point in the fact that his words ring true and are a sign of his general openness. His actions in public - washing the feet of refugees, refraining from ostentatious pomp and luxury - show that he wants to change the image of the papacy and be closer to "ordinary people". Of course, this polarises even more the way he is perceived in the ranks of the Church. In fact, it is in a Protestant rather than Catholic context that we find a far more profoundly considered view of the current problems of Czech society. Witness the recent debate on whether to welcome Syrian orphans where, unlike Protestant leaders, Cardinal Duka mainly followed the political line.

In wrestling with populism, fear and prejudice and the arrogance of amoral authority, what we need is faith that reflects ethical and universal values. The core of faith is what the Gospel calls *metanoia* - turning away from superficiality, from being drowned by the noisy megaphones of propaganda, and turning instead towards depth, towards the inner soul, the temple of conscience, which should be combined with a perspective based on reason. In this atmosphere of social unrest, the Christian churches should work closely with civil society across Europe to take a crucial role in improving the situation.