

# PROPHETIC PRESENCE

## Ordained Ministry after the Fall of Communism

By FRANTIŠEK LÍZNA

I AM BEGINNING TO WRITE THIS ARTICLE fourteen years to the day after a priest, Premysl Coufal, who had been clandestinely ordained, was murdered in his flat in Bratislava. That sort of experience makes you committed. Fr Coufal's death went unreported, like many other acts of repression directed against the underground Church during the Communist regime.

It was the Old Testament prophets who provided models for priestly ministry during the years of repression. In general the prophets did not write the books we know by their names because they themselves had been martyred. Unprotected by the clerical establishment, they died in silence – a silence like that in which the underground Church's sufferings were shrouded. The writings themselves came from their disciples: people who learned from the voice of God the need to oppose conventional religious practice and theology. It would be a nonsense were we now to draw our inspiration from the cultic rhetoric one finds elsewhere in the Old Testament, because Christ, our true high priest, stripped himself of priestly garb and became the servant of all. Moreover, he did not do this only in a cultic context, before Caiaphas, the head of the Temple establishment, but also before Herod, the civil leader, whose inquisitive questions he refused to answer. Christ accepted humiliations, was stripped and then dressed in the white garment of the fool. If our priest's alb signifies anything, it is this.

In the three short years of his public life, Jesus condemned the formalisms of establishment Judaism, so much so that its representatives could not tolerate him. But he clothed with martyrs' vestments, with vestments of true glory, a small collection of people disdained by the powerful and on the fringes of society: uneducated fishermen, tax collectors, an adulteress and the sick of every kind. These people he healed – but only temporarily. In the end they were to share his Passover on Calvary. Christ dressed in the likeness of the poor: those who roam our streets hungry, calling on us for relief and for the word of the gospel. Whatever we take from the cultic practices of the Old Testament, we must not be blind to their need.

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*Spiritual authenticity*

Under the Communist regime, priests were often in difficult, agonizing dilemmas. It will not be different in the future. The ordained ministry in our country will stand or fall by the quality of its conscientious reflection and discernment. The kind of person who will represent hope for the priesthood will be one who has followed Jesus into the desert through the power of the Holy Spirit, and there, as a kind of training for gospel proclamation, learnt to resist the devil's temptations. We need people who have learnt the way of Jesus Christ through their own experience, not just good theologians. We need spirits who will be able to confront the Pharisees of our own day, and who persist in doing so even when they end up being sentenced to the cross.

As the third millennium approaches there seems to be a religious crisis. Here in the Czech republic, this crisis arises because we are proclaiming the gospel without living it. But you cannot live a lie close to God. The sham is the more repellent because the values at stake are so important: it would not be so bad were it about realities other than God. Whenever we invoke the God of our creed, creator of all things visible and invisible, the whole company of heaven is listening to us. The gospel must be proclaimed authentically, as something which people live.

For me the greatest sham came when I sat listening to lectures about dogmatic theology. There all God's divine properties were dissected, and both teachers and students were as one in their unrelieved boredom. No one will be sustained when Christianity is taught like this. Nor can we hope any longer that people will pick up the faith through cultural osmosis, even in countries such as Ireland or Poland. The mass media now enable ideas to flow freely from one country to another. No culture can keep itself immune from outside influence, and censorship is futile. It might seem odd that the incarnation occurred when the world was still so underdeveloped technically; surely God could have waited until Jesus could have proclaimed the gospel to the whole planet by means of television. God's ways are inscrutable. Nevertheless, and more importantly, Jesus also showed us that the gospel cannot be proclaimed without personal commitment. One cannot rely on Roman collars and on mitres. The one who proclaims must descend into the depths of human poverty and suffering, into the abyss of the humanity for whom Christ came.

Priests have been abandoning their ministry, ultimately not because political systems have been changing or because of greater personal and social freedom, but because the living Christ somehow has been

vanishing from their lives. How can this be stopped? In our post-Communist situation, we must beg for God's help and mercy, and ask that women and men be courageous and attentive. When the golden calf appears we must spurn it; when we are overcome by fits of nostalgia for the seductive brown fleshpots of Egypt (or, in our case, for the cosy economic protectionism offered by a red flag), we must bow to nothing else but the cross of Christ. Moreover, if we are not to squander the riches which the sufferings under Communism have given us, we must imitate Moses by ascending the mountain and setting ourselves against the almost gravitational pull into the dark precipices of heresy. The great figures of the Bible refused to pray to foreign gods, looking instead for places of authentic sacrifice and worship.

What matters is not the political but the spiritual. It may be, in God's providence, that Czech Christianity is currently marked by the remnants of totalitarianism or with some kind of post-totalitarianism. Nevertheless, the problems which such situations pose must be seen not so much in political or economic terms as in spiritual ones. It is the quality of our spiritual life which will determine how successfully we negotiate these problems: how far we are in touch with the roots of our faith, how far those who profess to live as Christians can truly echo Paul's 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'. It is only the adjective 'total' that we should take from totalitarianism: total desire for the total following of Jesus, crucified and risen, so as to rise through Calvary into the Father's house.

### *Appropriating the past*

The priesthood of the future will, somehow or other, have to come to terms with the images of the glorious past, the past prior to Communism. Some people are working as hard as they can to restore those images. Many Catholics are nostalgic for the pre-conciliar church, tired of the present, pessimistic about the future, and dismayed by what is coming across our newly opened frontier with the West. Western freedom seems to be as destructive of our values as the red dragon of Communism – perhaps even more so. After all, most of us eventually came to terms with the Communist regime: 'Keep quiet and you'll be OK'. It only looked as though we were suffering.

There is also a crisis of authority. Co-operation with the red monster spread like ripples in water, especially as the dragon grew older and sicker and the economy more decayed. The Church as an institution, and especially the hierarchy, became corrupted by this tendency, and consequently lost all credibility among the clergy. It was just as well

that the dragon died when it did. You could hardly trust anyone. Nevertheless, today's bishops have to function within this breakdown of authority.

A group of Jesuit novices summed up our present situation as follows:

There are still elements of totalitarianism at large, mixed with a desire for democracy and freedom (even if the latter two are not always taken seriously). The Church is not immune to these realities. The main negative influences on us are a lack of dialogue, a sense of constant threat coming from outside, and a split between culture and the Church. All these lead to a growth of religious indifference and consumerism.

They concluded that we have to start by doing a social analysis, because the sins reflected in social structures are present in the Church as well, and corrupt its life and mission. This statement converges with what the German Jesuit theologian, Hans Waldenfels, said recently in Prague:

I think it would be good if the Church, without falling prey to false pragmatism, asked more emphatically what people really need, what they are looking for. Unfortunately, and all too often, we offer people a style of religiosity which they cannot live out. Often we fail to reckon with the new problems that are affecting them: loneliness, changed working conditions, difficulties in their personal lives. These will not be alleviated through cold discussion, but only through compassionate empathy.<sup>1</sup>

It is not our task to live in the past, but rather to look at it in order to sort out the good from the bad, the wheat from the tares.

#### *A renewed sense of Church*

As I said at the beginning, I started to write this article on the anniversary of the day they murdered Premysl Coufal, a clandestinely ordained priest. People like him – together with their supporters and the professors who taught them – are in large part responsible for our present freedom from religious persecution. We are in their debt. One of our unofficial teachers was Fr Josef Zverina. He was certainly one of the most courageous men I have ever met. He was an unshakeable witness to the Faith, and a staunch opponent of the politics of *détente* and *Ostpolitik*. Often people encouraged us to make compromises because – so it was claimed – of the apostolic benefit that these would

make possible. But Fr Zverina refused: he would not accept lax interpretations of the slogan 'the good of souls should be the supreme law', and it was no surprise that envoys sent by Cardinal Casaroli, in his capacity as Vatican Secretary of State, declined to meet with him.

Fr Zverina spent sixteen years in prison. When he came out he aligned himself with those who shunned the temptations of ecclesiastical bureaucracy and tried to reflect on new forms of evangelization. During the totalitarian regime he was one of our most important underground theologians and resistance figures. At the same time, his love for other people and his deep respect for their views was evident at first glance. He was not concerned about external adversaries; rather he laid insistent stress on how the biggest obstacles to the proclamation of the gospel lie within the Church and its ministry: superficiality, the ceremonial of our feast days both major and minor, bureaucratic methods, dated structures, ecclesiastical politicking. To my mind his most important study was called – and the title is typical of him – *Courage to be the Church*.<sup>2</sup> During the time of persecution this work gave us enormous impetus and encouragement, and amounted almost to a fifth Gospel. He noted the Church's tendency to take its cue from changes in political power structures, and thus to fail in obedience to the gospel and to the tradition of martyrdom. He set out a helpful typology of stances which a faithful Church can adopt towards the state: a basic co-operation with structures that serve the common good; a commitment to social change inspired by the gospel; active disobedience when the state issues commands contrary to divine law; the acceptance of suffering and martyrdom as the ultimate act of protest.

Zverina also wrote helpfully about Church structures:

The Catholic Church is not to be identified with the Pope, the Bishops or the priests. The Church is all God's people. The bishop is not above the Church because he comes from the Church. Equally, the Church must have a bishop or some other representative of Christ's authority and power. Bishop and people together are the foundations of the apostolic Church.

Zverina's vision is one of balance between authority and love, between power and service. This balance will be achieved only if all are absolutely faithful to Christ's teaching as handed on to us through the apostles: 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave' (Mt 20: 26–27). It is not right to play authority off against charisms because both are guaranteed by the Holy Spirit's promise. Authority is meant to regulate – rather than stifle – other charisms.

For Zverina, the role of the bishop is to protect what the community has inherited and to multiply the talents, bringing things both new and old out of the treasure house (Mt 25:20, 13:52). One of his main responsibilities is to pave the way for the new generation, and to offer the kind of service that will enable others to grow. It would be tragic were our episcopate to become a gathering of tired old men, a sterile bureaucracy putting a damper on everything, a threat to every initiative. It is obvious that the functioning of authority in the Church is changing and must change. The criteria for this change come not from the fluctuating values of the world around us (even though these are signs of the times which must be interpreted), but from faithful and clear discernment of the Spirit of Jesus. The bishop must neither come in with the iron fist against any form of innovation, nor remain innocuously passive. Both too much authority and too little authority are harmful.

Fr Zverina's ideas have not become obsolete. His message invites us into a permanent process of ongoing transformation and stresses the need to serve God and God's people. Whatever the prevailing political system, this message will always call forth resistance – and not only from professed enemies of the gospel, but also from within ourselves, since it challenges our own tendency to seek comfortable mediocrity.

After his nomination, our own Cardinal Primate in the Czech republic, Miloslav Vlk, wrote of how priests should be servants rather than rulers. When I wrote to him to thank him for saying this, I mentioned a suggestion I had made – in vain – to my own local bishop's office. I had suggested that we should stop talking about the priestly office – before the persecution priests were seen as civic functionaries, and hence the theological term 'office' has a bureaucratic resonance – and start talking about priestly service. The secretary had replied, in best official fashion, that such a change in terminology could not be considered. The bishops' conference had already decided to revert to the traditional titles. In itself, of course, a word means little. Nevertheless, the dimension of honest service is often absent, and many people see us once again as 'clerics', as civic clerks. Some presbytery doors even display a timetable of office hours.

There is a danger that we are reverting to a feudal system, with a pyramidal structure of authority, in which effective reciprocal communication takes place only between parties on the same level. Thus the pope talks with monarchs, the bishop with nobles and the parish priest with local dignitaries. The sick, the poor, the victims and the marginalized are left to Christ's love, to saints and charismatics.

Hierarchy betrays the poor and hungry. We need a resurgence of Christ's Spirit in the whole Church, so that we come to stand clearly and faithfully on the side of the dispossessed. Moreover, we need to rediscover – or discover – a genuine reciprocity and mutuality between bishops, laity and priests. Tomorrow's generations are going to be more and more sensitive to this need. Obviously authority in the Church is indispensable, but its role is to inspire, to foster growth, to think ahead and to lead. At present, sadly, the authorities tend rather to exert negative pressure, issuing prohibitions. We need to abandon a pyramidal model of the Church and replace it with something more organic that would be life-giving for everyone, in everyone and through everyone.

### *Overcoming conflicts*

The political and economic history of our country has influenced our culture and our spirituality. One prominent feature is a distrust of central authority, whether expressed through open criticism or passive aggression. This distrust comes out in church life through a general malaise about 'those in charge', about the bishops and about bodies such as deanery councils. The remedy is to adopt the much-cavassed principle of subsidiarity. Whereas elsewhere this means encouraging higher authorities not to assume responsibility for what can be done at a lower level, for us the need is to stress that responsibility needs to be taken at the grass roots. People at large should not expect authority to do everything for them, but rather take their own responsibility for the Christian life much more seriously.

We must also come to terms with the residue of a deep spiritual division in Czech Catholic culture, a division originating with the Enlightenment. A small group of forward-thinking laity and priests took up a stance of rationalist liberalism, while the institutional Church adopted a hostile view to the explosion of artistic, scientific and social developments of the day. The conflict between these two attitudes took various forms at various times. Under the Communist persecution, small élite groups of lay intelligentsia were prominent in the resistance (although some members of religious orders also made important contributions on which we should build). These lay groups were in a rather isolated position. Implacably at odds with the regime, they were also alienated from an official Church that remained, on the whole, conventional and obsolete, and indeed they held the institution in some disdain.

We need an open, pluralist Church in which the Catholic intelligentsia can come into contact with people in ordinary living situations, if

only to the extent of sharing the liturgy with them. We will need to overcome habits of pride, alienation and mutual suspicion, as well as a deeply rooted individualist approach to spirituality. At present our religious practice, sermons and spiritual direction foster only private devotion. We do not pay enough attention to the communion of saints and the mystery of the Church's *communio*. The Christian ideal is that of life given in love for others; our performance falls far short. Because of the divisions in the Church, our theory and practice have become separated. We do not have a proper theological culture, one that accepts and generates new ideas, and our embrace of the cult of the pragmatic only hides our spiritual mediocrity and sloth. Some rich theological material is now being published, and there is wide interest in theological questions; these factors will have their effect. At the same time, we must become aware of the important role to be played by the laity.

### *The struggle for faith*

In today's Czech Catholic Church, we must fight for the life of faith by creating vibrant communities in local settings. It is not peripheral niceties of theology that are at stake but the life of faith itself. Our pastoral strategies must concentrate on such basic questions as the grounding of faith, the nature of revelation and the gospel of Jesus. Ecclesialogically, we must abandon the image of a powerful Church and become a servant Church; we must move from being a quasi-established state Church and become a network of living communities; we must cease to be traditional and triumphalist, and become open, humble, poor and compassionate; we must overcome the divisions between an arrogant élite and an institution weighed down by complexes, and become instead a Church with a critical role in society grounded in spiritual wisdom and discernment. We must learn to think, feel and act like a genuinely Czech Church, a community of sisters and brothers in the Holy Spirit, loving the truth in a rich interior piety and in courageous service to others. Such a transformation will require change at all levels of the Church: parishes, dioceses and the national Church. The dangers are those of fear and of the attitude of the ghetto.

More than before, we must be clear that theology is not like the natural and technical sciences, a technical discourse of control that abstracts from what is essential and indispensable. Theology deals with the mystery of humanity's relationship to God and God's relationship to humanity. It is a mistake for theology to accept models of proof and analysis, breaking everything down to first principles and syllogisms. Rather, it should present God's mysteries, unsearchable as they are,



with respect, and seek how people may find a greater fullness of life in faith. If it is to inspire today's generation, it must become a conversation with God rather than a lecture on God. Love must be the beginning, middle and end of theology.

According to the most recent official statistics, forty per cent of Czechs consider themselves Roman Catholics. However, a 1992 survey showed that only eight to nine per cent of the population accept the basic truths of a Christian faith, and a random survey one spring showed that only five per cent of the population were at mass. It seems as though the proportion of believing Christians in our country is barely over ten per cent, of which Roman Catholics constitute half. Most of these are either young people or else among the elderly. The middle generation is probably irretrievably estranged from Christianity. It grew up with Communism, was formed by it and lived under its dominion; Communism's pragmatic, opportunistic mindset dominates it. As the elderly die out, the number of believers will diminish. After the 1989 revolution, a sudden growth of interest in Christianity became apparent, but it disappeared after a while. It was only a superficial interest in something unusual, something that had been forbidden. Quarrels about the return of church property, moreover, did not exactly help the situation.

### *The salt of the earth*

Christians are in a minority, surrounded by a society that does not favour them very much or even understand them. It is not yet clear how we will come to terms with this situation. No one seems to get enthused about the good news of God's incarnation. People's spiritual aspirations are often completely stifled by the struggle to survive psychologically or the temptations of consumerism. If not, they tend towards an eclectic mixture of New Age practices, garbled Eastern wisdom, gnosticism, strange beliefs about rebirth and reincarnation after death, philosophical relativism and a light-hearted flirtation with Christianity.

I have taken the analysis in the last few paragraphs from a recent article by a journalist, Petr Prihoda.<sup>3</sup> As for the future, Prihoda speculates that many Christians will find this situation threatening, and react by adopting a stance of defensiveness. The traditionalists may already have taken this path. But Prihoda offers an alternative: to accept the present situation as an opportunity and a challenge, and to see a value in a new form of Christian existence which is, in its own way, once again an expression of criticism and dissent. A gospel image for such a way of life is that of the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13). The

situation of being surrounded by critics is not necessarily bad for Christians. Was not Jesus himself also lonely in this kind of way? Was he not a grain which had to be crushed in order to yield a harvest a hundred times greater (Jn 12: 24)? And is there any other way which could deserve the name of evangelical?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Waldenfels, 'Nejsem prorokem a nechci jím ani být', *Katolický Týdeník – perspektivy* (Catholic weekly), 2 February 1995, p 3.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Zverina, *Odvaha být církví* (Munich: Opus Bonum, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Petr Přihoda, 'Budoucnost křesťanu u nás', *Lidové noviny*, 5 October 1994.