

**SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PAPAL VISITS  
TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC  
IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGES TAKING PLACE  
IN THE ECCLESIASTIC AND SOCIAL AREA**

JAROSLAV ŠEBEK

*Papež Benedikt XVI. přijel v září 2009 jako hlava katolické církve do České republiky poprvé. Jeho předchůdce Jan Pavel II. stihl od roku 1990 návštěvy tři. Všechny tyto cesty v sobě přitom nenesly jen pastorační a duchovní poselství a význam pro místní církevní společenství, ale jako na projekčním plátně se do atmosféry, která je doprovázela, odrážely i momentální rozpoložení v poměru církve, státu a společnosti.*

*Klíčová slova: Benedikt XVI.; Československo; Jan Pavel II.; papežská návštěva*

Pope Benedict XVI arrived in the Czech Republic as the head of the Catholic Church for the first time in September 2009. His predecessor, John Paul II, was able to visit the country three times from 1990. All these travels did not only deliver a pastoral and spiritual message too and were not only of great significance for the local Christian communities; the atmosphere accompanying them also reflected like a mirror the immediate attitudes and the interrelations between the church, state, and society.

The first one of these visits took place on April 21–22, 1990, and was very emotional and extraordinary from the very moment when John Paul II as the first pope in the country's history stepped on the Czech soil. The fact that the pope arrived in Czechoslovakia only half a year after what is known as the Velvet Revolution, was likened by President Václav Havel to a small miracle. Actually, the pope's presence in Prague had been something totally inconceivable just a few months earlier. One has only to look back into the 1980s when the possibility of a papal visit was seriously considered for the first time. John Paul II, the first pope of Slavonic origin, already wanted to come to Czechoslovakia in 1985 to commemorate the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saint Method's death. However, the invitation by Cardinal František Tomášek was not supported by the Communist authorities. Even the collaborating clergy, whose leaders were represented in the ecclesiastic commemoration preparatory bodies, did not have the courage to resist the political pressure. Consequently, their representatives, headed by the Olomouc Archdiocese Administrator, Bishop Josef Vrana, decided not to invite any foreign delegation, except that of the Vatican, to attend the event; however, with the reservation that it would be headed by a papal legate and not by the Pope himself.<sup>1</sup> Although representatives of many foreign Episcopal conferences showed interest in attending the Saint Method Anniversary ceremony, the position of the Czechoslovak authorities did not change.<sup>2</sup> The Archbishop of Vienna, Franz König, symbolizing the support of oppressed churches behind the Iron Curtain, was not allowed to

<sup>1</sup> National Archives Prague, Ministry of Culture – Secretariat for religious affairs (MK SPVC), Box 143, Oslavy sv. Cyrila a Metoděje (Constantine and Method Anniversary), Velehrad, Ceremonial rally at Velehrad 7. 7. 1985 on the occasion of the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Method's death. Review of the available information and the respective conclusions.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

attend, either. The reason for such steps was the fear that the Pope's presence could activate the Christians in Czechoslovakia like in Poland where his 1979 visit helped mobilize the people and contributed to the constitution of the anti-Communist Solidarity trade union movement one year later.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the Pope wanted to show solidarity with the oppressed church in Communist Czechoslovakia; therefore, a number of his documents and messages referred to the Constantine and Method tradition striving openly to demonstrate the symbiosis of Western and Eastern Christianity as a precondition of restoring the spiritual face of Europe. His ideas were delivered at the Velehrad Rally by State Secretary Agostino Casaroli and also attracted much attention from the Communist authorities.<sup>4</sup> Casaroli, however, could also witness in Velehrad the fact that the oppressed church was boldly holding its head high in Czechoslovakia as over a hundred thousand people attending the ceremonial service in Velehrad in a loud voice clearly expressed their dissent from the Communist policy.

A visit to the country by John Paul II was also discussed in connection with the canonization of Agnes of Bohemia which was being prepared at that time and which finally took place on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1989, just five days before the demonstrations in downtown Prague that triggered off the revolutionary changes in Czechoslovakia leading eventually to the fall of the Communist regime in the country.<sup>5</sup> Václav Havel as the first post-November president of Czechoslovakia considered the Pope's arrival as an important symbol. Also John Paul II himself attached much significance to the visit, which was proved by the fact that it had been prepared in an unusually short period of three months following the official invitation by President Václav Havel early in 1990. The pope was well aware of the fact that he was coming to a country characterized by mutual meetings of and also contradictions between different confessional traditions that had often been a source of many conflicting attitudes, and to a country that had critically opposed the papal policy in the past. Therefore, right upon his arrival and after having traditionally kissed the soil of the hosting country, the Pope declared that „*the Pope's kiss has been a kiss of fraternity, peace, and reconciliation. I wish it helps heal the scars of the past and remove the ancient shadows of mistrust that lay between Bohemia and Rome in the past.*”<sup>6</sup> *The euphoric atmosphere of the visit is also confirmed by the huge crowds of people attending the divine service. As to the number of attending worshippers, it was the greatest Pope's visit to this country. The mass at Letná Square was attended by an estimated seven hundred thousand people, and in Velehrad, the place linked with the Constantine-and-Method tradition that had been chosen by the Pope as the central place of his stay in Moravia, about half a million people gathered. An important item in the Pope's schedule was the meeting with representatives of the realm of science, art and culture held in the Prague Castle where he stressed the important role of artists and intellectuals in the struggle for right and justice under the Communist regime in this country and in other East European countries as well, which eventually culminated in the*

<sup>3</sup> RABANUS, J.: *Europa in der Sicht Papst Johannes Pauls II. Eine Herausforderung für die Kirche und die europäische Gesellschaft*. Paderborn 2004, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives Prague, MK SPVC, Box 143, Oslavy sv. Cyrila a Metoděje (Constantine and Method Anniversary), Velehrad, Ceremonial rally at Velehrad 7. 7. 1985 on the occasion of the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Method's death. Review of the available information and the respective conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> During its visit to Czechoslovakia in April, 1989 the Vatican delegation informed the Communist authorities that the Agnes canonization was to take place in Rome. This removed the permanent fear of the Communist leadership that the ceremony would take place in Prague or another place in Czechoslovakia and that in that connection a petition would be organized requiring the pope's visit. For Czechoslovak-Vatican talks see CUHRA, J.: *Československo-vatikánská jednání 1968–89*. Praha 2001, pp. 212–13.

<sup>6</sup> *Katolický týdeník*, 1, No. 19, 13. 5. 1990, p. 3.

*fall of the Iron Curtain. He wisely invited the Christians to join a nationwide dialog, as it is only on that basis that the problems to be faced in the future in this country and in all Europe can be solved. He pointed out that the dialog with the other partners should be held with mutual respect and with a sense of responsibility „for the common roots of the nation and of its culture“.*<sup>7</sup> John Paul II also mentioned the schism of Western Christianity whose roots go back to the Hussite Movement in the Bohemian Lands. In line with the efforts of reconciliation and of historical memory catharsis the Pope called for an objective assessment of the role of John Hus and mentioned also the speech on the freedom of conscience delivered by Cardinal Josef Beran at the Second Vatican Council in September, 1965. Thus, the Pope's speech gave an important impetus to the debate on Hus's legacy and its interpretation in both the confessional and the scientific field that culminated at the 1999 Lateran Symposium.<sup>8</sup> During the Velehrad Worship on April 22, 1990 he announced his intention to convene a special Episcopal Synod session to discuss the question of the spiritual revival in Europe and the role of religion in post-Communist Europe (the Synod was held in Rome at the end of November, 1991). The Pope closed his travel about Czechoslovakia in Bratislava so that he could also meet Slovakian Christians. The great success of the papal visit reflected the fact that there were great expectations in the country related to the Catholic Church after 1989. The Catholic Church enjoyed much trust, which was due to the fact that under the Communist rule it had constituted a clear alternative to the official ideology, well comprehensible also outside the Church. Particularly in the 1980s, it was František Tomášek, Archbishop of Prague and Cardinal, who became a generally recognized representative of the anti-Communist resistance and who, supported by the uncompromising policy of Pope John Paul II, was able to address large masses of the population. These – often not too realistic – expectations could materialize only partly, which undoubtedly found its reflection during the following papal visits.

In May, 1995 John Paul II came for another visit to the country, which in the meantime had become a separate Czech Republic. This time he canonized Zdislava of Lemberg and John Sarkander in Olomouc on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995. The visit also included a trip to Skoczow, Poland, the birthplace of John Sarkander, where the pope met with members of the local Evangelical congregation. Actually, the canonization of John Sarkander caused controversial reactions and some non-Catholic churches opposed it. They regarded him as a traitor who had contributed to the destruction of the Unitas Fratrum. John Paul II responded with an apology for the wrong done by the Catholics in the past. At the same time, in front of a vast crowd of pilgrims and TV cameras, he uttered words of forgiveness to non-Catholics. By doing so, the Pope acted as an experienced diplomat and a charismatic gospeller as well.<sup>9</sup> This visit can already be viewed as a part of the projects prepared on the eve of the Third Millennium to purge the historical memory, culminating in the ceremonial act of Pope's declaration in expiation of the Church's past guilt and wrong „Mea culpa“ of March, 2000.

However, in addition to the interconfessional tensions the second visit by Pope John Paul II was also affected by dissonances between the Church and the State whose visible beginning went back to the debates that had started in the country after what is known as the Velehrad Consecration of July, 1993. The consecration ceremony produced, as the Czech theologian

<sup>7</sup> Katolický týdeník, 1, No. 20, 20. 5. 1990, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> For the discussions at and the significance of the Vatican symposium on the role of M. John Hus, see PÁNEK, J. – POLÍVKA, M. (Eds.): *Jan Hus ve Vatikánu. Mezinárodní rozprava o českém reformátoru 15. století a o jeho recepci na prahu třetího tisíciletí* (John Hus in the Vatican. International discussion on the Czech 15<sup>th</sup> century reformer and on his perception on the eve of the 3rd millennium). Praha 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Katolický týdeník, 6, No. 22, 28. 5. 1995, p. 1.

Tomáš Halík put it, the feeling of triumphalism without being accompanied by the relevant spiritual education of Christians.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the negative response to that event was unprecedented and it provided additional evidence of certain divergence between the prevailing Czech society and the Church. As a matter of fact, the idea of fundamental irreconcilability between the Catholic religion and the Czech nation had been developing in the Czech society for a long time. This stereotyped pattern contributed to the fact that the position of the Catholic Church became quite delicate after the disintegration of the Hapsburg Monarchy and the creation of an independent Czechoslovak state in 1918. The feeling of solidarity with the Church persecuted first by the Nazis during the German occupation of the country (1939–1945) and then even more by the Communists (1948–1989) pushed the historical heritage of anti-Catholic feelings to the background for some time, but failed to delete them fully. And these negative reminiscences related to the Catholic Church came again to the fore in the mental attitude of the Czech public during the first half of the 1990s. A significant symptom of the growing dissonances between the church and the society was the drop of attendance at worships during the Pope's visit: In Prague, at the Strahov Stadium, less than a hundred thousand people were present and in Olomouc only about a quarter of a million on May 21st, 1995.

John Paul II, who was already seventy-seven years old and in poor health, came to the Czech Republic for the third time in April, 1997. The reason was the millennium of the martyr's death of Saint Adalbert. Again, the Pope met the Christian community also outside the capital; in Hradec Králové, he celebrated a mass for 50,000 young people from Bohemian and Moravian dioceses.<sup>11</sup> But the main mass was held again in Prague's Letná Square with the attendance of about 130,000. John Paul II invited the Christians not to seclude themselves, and referring to Saint Adalbert he warned of a pure adoration of well-being: „*May his legacy help you correctly understand the economic achievements without being enticed by the glitter of consumption.*” *He described the connections between the legacy of Saint Adalbert and the tasks that the Church is facing today, while mentioning also the European dimension of Adalbert's personality and stressing the need to reflect the Christian roots of European civilization.*<sup>12</sup> *The unresolved question of church property settlement was widely discussed in the media and there was also an extensive debate on the normalization of relations between the Czech Republic and the Vatican. While the economic settlement with churches was incessantly delayed by the Czech governments, the talks on a Czech-Vatican agreement started in 2000 and were closed by its signing in 2002. The agreement, however, has not come into effect yet, as the Lower House of Parliament has failed to ratify it. The 1997 papal visit was the last trip to the Czech Republic by John Paul II, a great man in 20<sup>th</sup> century Church history, who died in Rome in 2005.*

*Benedict XVI's visit to the Czech Republic in September, 2009 took place in a totally different atmosphere, which was also due to the rapid decline in the number of people professing a religious faith. In the last national census of 2001 only a little over 32 percent of the country's population indicated their religious faith (by mentioning an explicit confession) compared to 44 percent in 1991.*<sup>13</sup> And the number of active Christians continues dropping. Certainly, a number of explanations of and reasons for this situation can be found. It was only after the fall of the

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<sup>10</sup> HALÍK, T.: *Zasvěcení národa nebo krize dialogu* (Consecration of nation or a crisis of dialog)?: In: *Perspektivy*, September 1993 (supplement to *Katolický týdeník* 4, No. 39, 26. 9. 1993, p. 1).

<sup>11</sup> *Katolický týdeník*, 8, No. 18, 4. 5. 1997.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> For summary confession statistics during the post-revolution religious situation in the Bohemian Lands see BISCHOF, A.: *Konfessionsstatistiken zu den Böhmischesen Ländern und der Tschechoslowakei im 20. Jahrhundert*. In: Martin Schulze Wessel–Martin Zückert (eds.): *Handbuch der Religions- und Kirchengeschichte der böhmischen Länder und Tschechiens im 20. Jahrhundert*. München 2009, pp. 904–905.

Communist regime that the serious consequences of the period of Communist persecution became evident. The Church was too decimated by the years of oppression to be able to become one of the leading forces guiding the social transformation. The consequences of the separation of the Czech church from the international developments and from the theological and spiritual evolution became visible. The church did not recover from the loss of its leading representatives who had been arrested and sent to prison by both the Nazis and the Communists, and was unable to replace these losses (many outstanding personalities who had helped formulate the visions of the church in the Communist period were now active in the social and political arena while sometimes inexpressive people were promoted to the strategic positions in the church). However, it is in my opinion a sort of cliché to maintain that Czechs are the most atheistic nation. Polls and censuses do not prove an atheistic character of society, but rather its rejection of institutionalized religion. There are as many true atheists in society now as true believers, while many people, particularly those who are more educated and live in the urban milieu, tend to believe in supernatural phenomena.<sup>14</sup> The fact that religion has fully withdrawn from the public arena and that an open profession of faith under the Communist regime was not only improper, but even dangerous can explain to some extent why the people in the Czech Republic are shy in terms of religion even almost two decades after the Velvet Revolution of November, 1989.

The current problems, however, can also be explained by the underestimation of the real post-November situation in Czech society in terms of spiritual life and its need. After 1989, some Christians shared the opinion, which later proved to be illusory, that in the post-Communist era Christianity could fill the gap that had developed after the fall of the Marxist ideology and provide an alternative in the form of proven moral and value-based discourses. However, this expectation proved to be poorly founded. Actually, Marxism was the official state ideology, but in practice nobody had believed in it for many years; there is no doubt that what the Czech people experienced after the fall of “the Prague Spring” in 1968 and during the period of so-called “normalization” strongly contributed to the death of Marxism in the mind of people. Therefore, the church could hardly fill that space and spread its values there.<sup>15</sup>

In view of this trend in religion there was some skepticism about the pope’s forthcoming visit. Nevertheless, the interest in the divine services celebrated by the pope exceeded the initial estimates: the mass in Brno was attended by some 120,000 people, that in Stará Boleslav by about 40–50,000. The interest of the media, which went beyond the mere full coverage of the pope’s stay, was also quite unusual, as particularly the Czech TV channel ČT 24 reviewed the history of interrelations between the church, state and society and showed it in a broad context.<sup>16</sup> The pope stressed the effort to overcome the crisis, which in his opinion should concentrate on intellectual questions and related spiritual revival, as well as on systematic work with the young generation living in a valueless vacuum. It cannot be ignored that the pope’s statements could resonate with the feelings of some part of society that was aware of the need for ethical limits in social conduct and for alternative models to the consumption-based way of and approach to life. Typical in this respect is the fact that the absence of ethical limits is felt not only at the individual, but also at the public level.<sup>17</sup> Outside the Catholic community, however, mainly in

<sup>14</sup> NEŠPOR, M.: *Religion in der tschechischen Gesellschaft nach 1989*. In: Martin Schulze Wessel – Martin Zückert (eds.): *Handbuch der Religions- und Kirchengeschichte der böhmischen Länder und Tschechiens im 20. Jahrhundert*. München 2009, p. 885.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that the expected understanding and respect between the church and society did not come true made many Christians very skeptical about and frustrated by the general post-November development.

<sup>16</sup> For the media coverage of the papal visit, see for example the interview with TV moderator Václav Moravec in *Katolický týdeník* (see *Katolický týdeník*, 20, No. 43, 20.–26. 10. 2009).

<sup>17</sup> For details of the last papal visit to the Czech Republic, see *Papež Benedikt XVI. v České republice*. Kostelní Vydří 2009.

the media and the non-Catholic public, the pope's statements were viewed as an effort of Benedict XVI to wake the Czech Catholics from some lethargy, as the local ecclesiastic elites had failed to formulate a long-term political vision of the church to respond to the current social trends and suggest solutions.

It is certainly interesting that the accents of religious revival stressed by the pope remind us to some extent of those in Czechoslovakia between the two world wars when the Catholic church also had to face the challenge of secularization pressures and to search for a new spiritual and social identity in modern society. After some initial hesitation the church was able to respond to that situation with a remarkable religious revival whose protagonists were particularly members of holy orders and of intellectual Catholic associations.

Part of Benedict XVI's visit was also a meeting with the academic community in the Vladislaus Hall of the Prague Castle. The pope spoke on that occasion about the urgent need of a dialog between faith and reason. Referring to Pope John Paul II's Encyclical "Fides et Ratio" (from the year 1998) he stated among other things that *"faith and reason complement each other and that either have a scope of action of their own; in spite of that some people still try to separate them from one another. The advocates of this positivistic exclusion of God from the universality of reason deny the deepest conviction of the faithful and, at the same time, hamper the real dialog of cultures that they require themselves. Reason, if it is deaf to everything that concerns God and drives religion out to the realm of subculture, is unable to enter into the dialog between cultures that is so urgently needed in our current world"*<sup>18</sup>. The rapid development of information technologies brings about not only new challenges, but also temptations and risks. One of such risks, according to the pope, consists of trying to separate the use of reason from the search for truth. In the pope's statements he made a very strong call for seeking common points of both science and faith to achieve the real truth and freedom, and to overcome the previous separation dating mostly back to the beginning of Modernism.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the Prague message of the pope appeared to be not only an important stimulation to the spiritual situation in the Czech Republic, but also an important signal to seek a European identity in the current dialog of cultures and a call for a partner-like dialog with the agnostics and those who seek across the spectrum of opinions.

## Shrnutí

### Reflexe papežských návštěv v Československu a České republice v kontextu přeměn v církevně-společenské sféře

Papežovo pražské poselství se jeví nejen jako významný podnět pro duchovní situaci České republiky, ale i jako důležitý signál k hledání evropské identity v současném dialogu kultur a výzva k partnerskému dialogu s agnostiky a hledajícími napříč názorovým spektrem.

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<sup>18</sup> *Papež Benedikt XVI. v České republice* (Pope Benedict XVI in the Czech Republic). Kostelní Vydří 2009, p. 98–99.

<sup>19</sup> The relationship of actual church identity with modernity was discussed shortly after Benedict XVI's visit by the important Austrian theologian Paul Zulehner. See ZULEHNER, P.: *Europas Religionen im Modernisierungsstress*. In: Johann Marte – Vincenc Rajšp – Karl W. Schwarz – Miroslav Polzer (eds.): *Religion und Wende in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa 1989–2009*. Innsbruck–Wien 2010, pp. 28–32.