

Chronicle

Czechoslovakia — One Year after the Petition for Religious Freedom

More than a year has passed since 600,000 believers signed a petition for religious rights in Czechoslovakia. Drafted at the end of 1987 by Catholics in Moravia, the 31-point petition set out all the main problems encountered by the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia and provided the clearest indication so far of the laity's discontent with the status quo.* Augustin Navrátil, a 60-year-old railway signalman and tireless campaigner for religious rights in Czechoslovakia, is commonly regarded as the author of the petition. When his local newspaper, *Kroměřížska jiskra*, printed an article by an official of the Czechoslovak People's Party denouncing the Catholic initiative, Navrátil wrote back in defence of his work. He was later charged with 'slander' and, following a court hearing on 13 September 1988, was admitted to psychiatric hospital on 28 October allegedly suffering from *paranoia querulans*, or a mental derangement marked by excessive complaining. Navrátil was released from hospital in February after doctors said his condition had stabilised, although he will continue to be treated as an outpatient.

There can be no doubt that it was Navrátil's authorship of the petition, and not any recurrent psychological problem, that earned him this latest

stint in psychiatric clinic. The Czech primate, Cardinal Tomášek, who knows Navrátil well and two Swiss doctors who examined Navrátil last September have all vouched for his sanity and the doctors regarded the criminal proceedings against the Catholic layman as 'farcical'.

One year after the petition was presented to the Czechoslovak government, the church situation there is little improved. This document which gained such widespread and unexpected support throughout Czechoslovakia appears not to have won many concessions from the state authorities. True, three new bishops were consecrated in May 1988, the first episcopal appointments in 15 years. And some of the female religious orders banned in 1950 have at last received state recognition and the right to accept novices.** There has also been a positive change in the procedure for enrolling children in religious education classes. Although these still take place in school, enrolment is now held in the church and is a matter for the local priest, not the school authorities.

*See text of petition on pp. 165-66, and 'Petition for Religious Freedom in Czechoslovakia', *RCL* Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 162-64.

**See *Document* on pp. 166-69.

While these changes have been welcomed by Czechoslovak believers, they have failed to produce any major improvement in the life of the church. Most dioceses, ten out of 13, still have no residential bishop and the number of clergy in active service is well below that required. It may be the case that more young men are being admitted to train for the priesthood than in recent years, but there are still only two functioning Roman Catholic seminaries. A request for the return of a third seminary in Prague was included in the petition but has gone unanswered by the authorities.

But the importance of the Catholic petition cannot be judged solely in terms of what concessions it has won, or failed to win, from the government. In a country where for many years the Catholic church has been synonymous with Cardinal Tomášek, its courageous leader, the laity are now beginning to assert themselves. The petition, written and signed by lay believers, expressed the concerns of ordinary church members. And it was followed on 25 March last year by another public expression of concern at the position of religious believers in socialist Czechoslovakia. On that day in the centre of the Slovak capital, Bratislava, several thousand Catholics prayed for religious and civil rights and for new bishops to fill the vacant sees. The authorities' response was as brutal as it was unexpected. Police used water-cannon and teargas to disperse the crowds, and similar police tactics have since been employed at other large and unofficial gatherings. Twelve months later, participants in the vigil were still being tried.

The Bratislava experience did not demoralise Czechoslovak believers, but rather increased their collective awareness of the urgent need for change. The next few months produced many more examples of their

determination to see their situation improved. At the same time as three new bishops were consecrated in Prague and Trnava, Catholics in the Moravian towns of Brno and Olomouc were holding meetings to pray for bishops of their own. Reports from Moravia suggest that Catholics there take seriously their part in winning change; by prayer and fasting they intend to 'remove all obstacles to the appointment of good pastors', (Appeal for support dated 1 June 1988).

A further sign that lay believers are ready to play a more active role in the life of the church is seen in the formation last October of an association of Catholic laity. *Pokoj na zemi* (Peace on Earth) as the association is called, aims to defend religious rights in Czechoslovakia and deepen the unity of the Catholic Church. It is inspired by the strength of Catholic feeling expressed in the support given to the petition and subsequent pilgrimages. The main aim of the association is to assist in the ten-year programme of spiritual renewal announced by Cardinal Tomášek in 1987, but equally important to the association is that the state authorities take notice of, and act upon, the 31 demands of the petition.

Believers have recently demonstrated a lack of fear in supporting their brethren in trouble with the authorities. In July 1988 almost 4,000 Slovaks signed a petition to President Husak protesting against the four-year prison sentence passed on Catholic Ivan Polanský. Polanský had been in pre-trial detention since November 1987 accused of duplicating and distributing mostly religious *samizdat*. Then on 13 September a group of Navrátil's supporters formed a committee for his defence. A petition calling on the authorities to release Navrátil from psychiatric hospital was circulated and a vigil for him held on 11 December in Olo-

mouc. Around 1,000 Christians took part.

While the Czechoslovak government continues to insist that it is 'striving for the best possible relations with the churches and the faithful' and that it is 'prepared to take up all well-intentioned suggestions' for improving relations with the churches*, there is little evidence to support these claims. When last January police forces brutally broke up assemblies in Prague to mark the 20th anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation, Cardinal Tomášek wrote to Prime Minister Adamec in protest. 'Citizens wanted to use the occasion of the

anniversary of Palach's death. . . to express their desire for full freedom.' The Cardinal said that believers' trust in the system had been shattered by the action of the security forces, ending his letter with an appeal to the government to 'start immediate negotiations with the Church and all citizens!' If Czechoslovak citizens, religious believers included, continue to voice their grievances so publicly, it may be only a matter of time before the government is forced to negotiate.

Compiled by members of
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Recent Changes in Lithuania

In recent months the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania has taken advantage of the opportunities offered by *glasnost** to obtain a number of concessions from the Soviet authorities. Undoubtedly the greatest achievement for the Catholics was the return to the church of Vilnius Cathedral after 38 years during which it was used first as a storehouse and then as a picture gallery. On 23 October 1988 a public announcement was made on television that the cathedral was to revert to religious use, after Cardinal Sladkevičius, the leading Lithuanian bishop, had rejected a state offer to allow the building to be used only periodically for religious services. A mass held the next day by Cardinal Sladkevičius and three other Lithuanian bishops on the steps of the cathedral, in front of thousands of Catholics packed into the square outside, was followed by an even more emotional event on Sunday

5 February — when the cathedral was reconsecrated by Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius the 77-year-old apostolic administrator of Vilnius diocese. Bishop Steponavičius, exiled by the authorities to the small village of Žagare since 1961, was allowed to take up his duties in Vilnius once again. For the 30,000 Lithuanian Catholics who filled the Cathedral and Gediminas Square, the service of reconsecration was a double victory.

The service on 5 February, like that on 23 October, was broadcast on Lithuanian television. The broadcast included a speech by Nijole Sadunaite, who had served a sentence from 1974-80 in labour camps and exile for her work on the *samizdat Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*. She spoke on behalf of all

*Prime Minister Adamec to church representatives on the occasion of 70th anniversary of the republic — 28 October 1988.