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STATE AGAINST CHURCH. STATE EFFORTS TO  
BIND THE APPLICATION OF THE RESULTS  
OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL  
IN THE CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The aim of this contribution is to show in what way the Communist non-democratic regime in Czechoslovakia tried to impede the Catholic Church from accepting and applying the results of the Second Vatican Council. The contribution represents the results of primary research of archive sources in a project financed by the Czech Science Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, I have to warn that these are sources of Communist provenance – the reports and materials of ministries or the Central Committee of the Czech Communist Party. Let's say that in the sources we can find mostly the interpretation of the reality (not the reality itself) about how the Communist rulers and their collaborators inside the Church perceived the Church and the Council. The sources indicate that there was a targeted effort by the Communist regime to minimize the Church – and so in this case to minimize the innovative changes made by the Council.

THE SELECTION OF THE DELEGATION

When John XXIII announced the holding of the Council, it was totally unclear whether the bishops from the Communist countries would be able to attend it. On the contrary, this possibility was

<sup>1</sup> This text has been written as part of the research plan *History of the Reception of Vatican II in the Czech Lands* (GAČR č. 409/09/1286).

considered somewhat unlikely – indeed many of them (e.g. just from Czechoslovakia), if they were not in prison, had not been to Rome since the 1940's.

Until it became clear that Czechoslovakia would allow the presence at the Council of at least some of its bishops, the Vatican intended that the Czechoslovak Church would be represented by the Italian rector of the Czechoslovak Pontifical College Nepomucenum Alfredo Bontempi, who had been ordained bishop in 1962 just for this reason.<sup>2</sup>

All of the Czechoslovak bishops (including those the state didn't acknowledge such as Ladislav Hlad – or weren't in the bishop's office – e.g. Vasil Hopko, Stanislav Zela, Ján Vojtaššák, and others) received the invitation. 15 Catholic bishops lived in Czechoslovakia in 1962 (not including bishops who received their ordination secretly without knowledge of the state).<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of them had to decline the invitation.

Although they were apparently forced to write letters to the Holy See, which were censored by the state authorities, they didn't agree to be represented by the so-called procurators – although this was in accordance with the Council rules. The authorities pushed them to be represented by the Communist collaborators within the Church. Although the procurators couldn't vote at the Council, they could take part at its sessions and to sign the Council deeds. None of the Czech and Moravian bishops designated any procurator. Only 4 bishops<sup>4</sup> attended the Council as Czechoslovak delegates.

As well in the “Council case” it was shown that the Communist state had abolished the one thousand years valid separation of spiritual and secular power and integrated both powers. This denied the European development, which brought the freedom of man. The Communist

<sup>2</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Informativní zpráva VI. oddělení MŠK o II. vatikánském koncilu, 17.12.1962; <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bbontem.html>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Balík, J. Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989*, Brno, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Eduard Nécsey, Ambróz Lazík, František Tomášek, Róbert Pobožný.

state not only controlled the Church through its agents in the bishop's offices, but also decided who could take part at the meeting of the Church Council. It was namely the state, or in the last resort the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which decided who could take part in the Council.

The party even thought that an officer from the party secretariat should prepare the discussion papers of the Council fathers. The party devoted so much attention to the Council that the Minister of Education and Culture and the Minister of Interior assigned two support staff (with knowledge of the Latin language) to it. At the Czechoslovak embassy in Rome a special worker of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked for the whole Council period of four years. He was in regular contact with the Czechoslovak delegates and was probably a collaborator of the secret service.<sup>5</sup>

Czechoslovak delegates not only had to write reports about their activities, but they also had to take part in individual and collective talks at the Ministry of Education after returning home.

The ways for determining the delegations changed during the four years of the council. So for example at the end of the council in 1965 the composition of the delegation was consulted with the Ministry of Interior and with the chairman of the priests' collaborationist organization (he was also the Minister of Health). The Ministry of Education and Culture proposed the members of the delegation that were approved by the party Central Committee.<sup>6</sup>

#### CZECHOSLOVAK COUNCIL PARTICIPANTS

In total 16 Czechoslovak delegates took part in (at least one) of the Council sessions. But only 4 of them were legitimate Council

<sup>5</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Náměty k besedě s. ministra s delegací na 4. část II. vatikánského koncilu, 9.IX.1965.

<sup>6</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Návrh na složení delegace katolických hodnostářů z ČSSR pro čtvrtou část II. vatikánského koncilu v Římě, 1965.

fathers – bishops. The remaining 12 were supporting members of the delegation.<sup>7</sup>

The largest delegation took part at the first Council session – 12 participants (although only the 3 Council fathers had the right to vote, they were accompanied by 9 other members). With each of the following sessions the delegation dwindled, until at the last session there were only seven participants from Czechoslovakia (four Council fathers, accompanied by three other members).

It is very interesting to view the national structure of the delegation. Although Czechoslovakia was in the sixties a unitary state of Czechs and Slovaks, the national aspect had its importance. The national division was used by the Czechoslovak exiles – there were large differences between Czechs and Slovaks; also the Council delegation itself was internally (also mentally) divided into Czechs and Slovaks. At the beginning in 1962 there were two thirds Czechs against only one third Slovaks. Already in 1963 there was proportional representation. And at the end there were only two Czech delegates against five Slovaks. But it must be said that the situation from 1965 better reflected the force and vitality of the Church in both parts of the Republic.

The accompanying staff was so large probably because the Communist regime believed that the presence of its collaborators within the Church at the Council could bring greater benefit to the Communists. But likely over time the state found out that these benefits were minimal (or zero), so the number of procurators was significantly reduced. The expected gathering of information on the attitudes of bishops and other background information failed – the bishops did not trust the people assigned to them as secretaries, so they did not tell them anything. The people without the right to participate in the Council did not receive the background information. No new information about the Czechoslovak exiles in Rome was gained, as they were on their guard.

Among the 16 members of the delegation there were 9 registered agents of the State Security, as well as 9 overt collaborators with the Communists – but these two categories were not always identical.

<sup>7</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Účastníci koncilu.

Czechoslovaks in exile also attended the Council. The most important of them were Josef Cardinal Beran,<sup>8</sup> Pavel Mária Hnilica,<sup>9</sup> and Michal Rusnak.<sup>10</sup>

While the accompanying staff was more a shame for the delegation, nothing like that can be said about the bishops. Nevertheless, the Czechoslovak Council fathers (out of all Czechoslovak bishops) were more responsive and more accessible to look for a way that the Church and State could live together, but they did not agree to play the role of puppets.

The Soviet Orthodox observers (protojerej Vitalyj Borovoj) praised the discussion paper of František Tomášek on the decree about ecumenism. Because of this paper the whole Czechoslovak delegation received a Jubilee Gold Medal from Patriarch Alexei. Only three of these medals were awarded – one was given to the Archbishop of Geneva Francesco Charrière who in 1963 congratulated (on behalf of the Pope) Moscow Patriarch Alexei with his fifty-year anniversary as a bishop. The second medal was given to Augustin Cardinal Bea, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The patriarch gave instructions to give the third medal to the person who executes the best work in the field of convergence of Christians at the Council.<sup>11</sup>

There were not many discussion papers by the Czechoslovak Council fathers. At the first session probably no one spoke. We don't know why this occurred. Perhaps because all of them were in Rome for the first time after many years or perhaps due to their shyness. Other possible explanations are that they did not believe to be experts on the topics or the fact that until the last moment they didn't know whether they would be able to attend the council.

<sup>8</sup> S. Vodičková, *Josef kardinál Beran*, in: S. Balík, J. Hanuš a kol.: *Primasové katolické církve. Země střední a východní Evropy v čase komunismu*, Brno, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Pavol Mária Hnilica [http://www.kbs.sk/do\\_pdf/index.php?cid=1230378204](http://www.kbs.sk/do_pdf/index.php?cid=1230378204).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bRusnak.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Zpráva o pobyte československej delegaie na II. časti II. vatikanskeho koncilu v Ríme od 25.9.-5.12.1963, Š. Zárecký.

In 1963 they spoke four times – F. Tomášek three times and Slovak bishop E. Nécsey once. They had papers on the Church and ecumenism. Just the last paper aroused the response mentioned above. F. Tomášek in this paper suggested convening a special council of Catholic and Orthodox bishops to accelerate the unity.

From the point of view of the Czechoslovak discussion papers the most interesting period came at the end of Council, in September 1965. F. Tomášek's paper on the program of world help to the family was no problem for the Communist regime. The three others were considerably more problematic. Prague Archbishop Josef Cardinal Beran, who was at this time for the first half year in exile in Rome, gave a speech on the freedom of religion.<sup>12</sup> Two exile bishops with Czechoslovak roots – M. Rusnák and P. Hnilica provoked a literary scandal (from the perspective of the Communist regime). They spoke in the debate about the pastoral constitution of the Church in the modern world. In this debate they led the discussions about atheism, but in the frame of the beginning of Vatican's Ostpolitik no separate declaration on atheism was adopted. The Council with prolonged applause received both "Slovak" contributions; the world press also noticed them. Communist Czechoslovakia responded with a prolonged hysterical campaign.<sup>13</sup>

#### STATE APPROACH TOWARDS TWO COUNCIL POPES

Generally we can say that despite the later great helpfulness of Pope Paul VI with his Ostpolitik, the Communist regime perceived John XXIII in a more positive manner. His election was perceived as a big chance for change. Pius XII had been seen as the greatest enemy of Communism whose influence created the negative attitude of the Czech Catholic Church towards Communism.

The growing enthusiasm of Communists for John XXIII (which culminated with his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*), and the subsequent

<sup>12</sup> Hanuš, Jiří: *Malý slovník osobností českého katolicismu 20. století*. CDK, Brno, 2005, p. 261-262.

<sup>13</sup> M. Hudaček, *Totalitný systém a jeho vplyv na jezuitov (1950–1989)* <http://jezuiti.sk/blog/dejiny/2010/totalitny-sytem-1950-1989-a-jeho-vplyv-na-jezuitov/>.

disappointment with Paul VI (that he is not the same as his predecessor), did not allow the Communists to evaluate properly the shifts that have occurred in the Church. They noticed that the tone of the anticommunism of Vatican was blunted, but they didn't notice that the Church might revive through the empowerment of the role of laity. Until in 1965 they noted that "since the accession of John XXIII there is an ongoing strong wave of religious and political mobilization of Catholicism in the whole world".<sup>14</sup>

#### STATE APPROACH TO THE COUNCIL TOPICS

In following the Council's work, the main interest of the Communist regime was primarily focused on the topic whether Communism will be rejected. The regime did not understand that other topics could be a greater threat – that the change within the liturgy (stronger position of the laity, the national language of liturgy) or ecumenism could be important in the process of strengthening the Church.

But already in 1963 Communist analysts noticed the voices stating that today "the Church has greater concern with the liberalism and atheism in the West than with dialectic materialism". Despite that they had to bind this information to the relationship with the socialist countries: "the Church leaders see the danger in the decline of religion in capitalist countries because this weakens the forces for the fight against Communism".<sup>15</sup>

The church department at the Ministry of Education and Culture perceived the following two main topics after the end of the first Council session: a) the question of the union of the Christian churches, which can concern the forces defending the economical, political, and ideological positions of the Church in contemporary social development; b) the

<sup>14</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Informační zpráva o situaci mezi duchovními ke vztahu k II. vatikánskému koncilu, 1965.

<sup>15</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Informativní zpráva o průběhu a výsledcích druhé části II. vatikánském koncilu, 1963.

question of the revision in the international relations of the Vatican so that its relations better reflect the contemporary world situation and aid the perspectives of further development, first of all with the revision of the relations with the socialist countries.<sup>16</sup>

For a long time there were doubts whether the change of Vatican politics towards socialist countries was real – whether it had “only a strategic and tactical character”. But simultaneously already the careful optimism regarding the friendlier attitude of the Vatican dominated.

But then the state probably recognized, how much the application of the results of the Council could improve the force of Catholicism in the society. Therefore, the state tried by all possible means (especially by administrative ways) to hinder this application. The State refused to give paper for new publications – catechisms, manuals for the preparation for the sacraments (First Communion, Confirmation, Confession), new Mass schedules or the hymnbooks. Documents of Council were not collectively published in the Czech lands until 1989 (only a small part in the magazine for priests), while the Council documents were published in all other socialist countries, even in Slovakia. The state also limited the publication of usual Church texts. The state approval for publishing the post Council missal and breviary did not come until 1982; they were actually published in 1983. However, before publishing the state reviewed and approved these sacred texts! The tradition of Byzantine Caesaropapism came back to life. The state for the whole period of Communist government demanded that any materials that were to be sent or forwarded to the Vatican be approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The state vehemently prohibited the Episcopal ministry from working collegially.<sup>17</sup> Almost for the whole Communist period it did not allow the majority of the dioceses to be managed by regular diocesan

<sup>16</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Informativní zpráva VI. oddělení MŠK o II. vatikánském koncilu, 17.12.1962.

<sup>17</sup> Národní archiv, f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (MŠK), Praha, 1945–1967, sign. 47 – odbor pro věci církevní, k. č. 39, Záznam o besedě s představiteli římsko-katolické církve na MŠK, 29.12.1964.



bishops. Moreover, the state resisted the founding of the collective body – the conference of Catholic Bishops.

The creation of a diaconal ministry was a never-ending story in the negotiations between state and Church. By 1968 almost once a year František Tomášek, later cardinal, sent repeated requests to the state authorities for the establishment of the diaconal ministry, but without any success.

At first the state would allow diaconal ministry only for single men for whom the diaconate would be his main occupation. Of course it was funny – such men could be priests. But the Church lacked these priests. That is why the bishops and other representatives of Church tried to establish the diaconal ministry – they intended to confide the managing of many parishes without priests to them. Bishops counted about 1500 new deacons (mostly married, with civilian employment) who could manage the parishes.<sup>18</sup> It was the time when the lack of Czech priests culminated – their number decreased in forty years between 1948 and 1989 from 2934 to 1450.<sup>19</sup>

The Communist regime by not allowing the diaconal ministry for married men largely determined the image of the Czech Church after 1989. Namely after this year it was decided to restore the old, clerical model of the Church where its administration is built on priests, and not laymen or married deacons. Although the situation with the low number of priests is now continuing, the administration of the Church now does not count on anyone else contributing. Of course, it is hard to say today whether 1500 deacons could be possibly found; but it is not impossible and very likely it would greatly change the Church's mentality. Today the situation is dramatically different.

The Communist regime understood very late, how dangerous is the change of liturgy, which is based on the stronger role of laymen. The state only for a long time refused the possibility of laymen leading the liturgy of the Word, declaring that it is against Church laws.

<sup>18</sup> Národní archiv, f. MK ČSR, SPVC, k. č. 129, Stanovisko SPVC MK ČSR k dopisu kardinála Tomáška prezidentu ČSSR, 1981, s. 1.

<sup>19</sup> S. Balík, J. Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989*, Brno, 2007.

But the Church tried to connect laymen in a maximum number of possible ways – in the sense of the Decree on the apostolate of the laity.

Retrospectively seen – the greater involvement of the laity in the Church is one of the greatest mental transformations of the Church, inspired by the Council. Since the late sixties we can observe the growing importance of the laity. While in the forties and fifties it was almost impossible to think that the Catholic Church actions, including political parties could be managed by anybody else than priests. Later it became obvious that these actions are managed by laymen. The first fruits were already visible in 1968, when the legendary Work of Council Renewal was dominantly based on the activity of the laity. Laymen gradually got into a consultative body of Cardinal Tomášek, in the late eighties other laymen held Catholic events associated with resistance against the Communist regime.

In concluding we can say that the Second Vatican Council came literally as a godsend for the Czech Church in the middle of totalitarian times. Even though the Communist state refused by all means to apply its conclusions to church life, it failed to stop them. Also through the transformation of the liturgy the Council changed the understanding of the role of the laity in the Church. It is very difficult to imagine in what condition the Church would be after the fall of Communism without the Council, but very likely the conditions would have been much worse than with the Council.