

Chronicle

Petition for Religious Freedom in Czechoslovakia

Since January this year a petition calling for greater religious freedom for all citizens has been circulating in Czechoslovakia. Over 400,000 Czechoslovak citizens, most of them Catholics, have so far signed it, making this the most popular civil rights petition in the communist republic's forty-year history. *Catholic Proposals for a Solution to the Situation of Believers in Czechoslovakia*, as the document is called, is the work of Augustin Navrátil, a sixty-year-old railway worker and defender of Catholic rights, who also has to his credit numerous "open letters" to the authorities. In close collaboration with a group of Catholics from Moravia, Navrátil drew up his proposals last December after the seeming failure of talks between the Vatican and the Prague administration to solve any of the church's most pressing problems.

The first, and perhaps most important, demand laid down in the thirty-one point petition is for the separation of church and state in Czechoslovakia. If conceded this would necessarily limit the regime's capacity to intervene in church affairs, at present a bone of contention with the Vatican. Priests would, as a result, no longer have to possess a state licence to exercise their ministry

and religious activists could no longer be charged with "obstructing state supervision of the church" — article 178 of the Criminal Code. The thirty demands which follow cover all aspects of religious life, from the rehabilitation of the religious orders (banned since 1950 from accepting new members) to the right to take part in spiritual retreats at home and pilgrimages abroad and to receive imported religious literature. Next to the demand for separation of church and state comes the demand that new bishops be appointed without government interference, a pointed reference to state blocking of episcopal appointments in the past. Of all the problems currently facing the Czechoslovak Catholic Church the shortage of residential bishops is undoubtedly the greatest. Since 1973, when four bishops were consecrated, there have been no new appointments. The result is that of 13 dioceses only three are filled by residential bishops, and these bishops are without exception aged and infirm.

Few of the demands expressed in this petition are new. Since Cardinal Tomášek's letter of April 1986 to Minister of Culture Milan Klusak calling for a complete revision of the 1949 church laws there have been

several demands from both clergy and laity for separation of church and state. Most notable was the *Charter of Believers in Czechoslovakia*, received by Vatican Radio in September 1987, which echoes many of the Cardinal's earlier demands and adds a further demand for new bishops. Why then, if it contains nothing new, has this petition of Navrátil's found such popular support in Czechoslovakia?

Although it is a lay initiative, the Moravian petition can boast the unqualified backing of the Czech Primate, Cardinal Tomášek. There can be no doubt that such public support from the country's foremost churchman at the start of the campaign helped the believers' cause greatly. In his letter of 4 January, the Cardinal urges his people to "make their voice heard by the state authorities" through signing the petition, and he declares: "Cowardice and fear are unworthy of a true Christian". His numerous letters to government offices have met with no reply, the Primate reveals, and therefore it is the "duty" of Christians in Czechoslovakia to raise publicly the matters that concern them directly. However, important though the Cardinal's backing undoubtedly is, it cannot account fully for the petition's nationwide success. For although it began in Moravia, the petition has so far gathered greater support in Slovakia, where the Czech Primate has less influence.

Equally important was the timing of the campaign's launch. Last October's Bishops' Synod in Rome, at which Czechoslovakia's sole representative was Cardinal Tomášek, provided a suitable occasion for Pope John Paul II to draw attention to the plight of the church in Czechoslovakia. The fact that only two of the country's bishops had made the September *ad limina* visit to Rome and that the Cardinal was

alone at the Bishops' Synod bore "eloquent witness" to the conditions within which the church there had to operate, the Pontiff said. Furthermore, it was a situation without parallel in Eastern Europe. The theme of the Synod was the laity, and its vital role within the church was emphasised. Had Navrátil required any encouragement for his undertaking, this Papal speech provided it.

Less than a month after the Rome Synod, the Czechoslovak church was dealt a heavy blow. Bishops Gabříš and Vrana, who had been ill for some time, died bringing to ten the number of sees without residential bishops. What had been an unsatisfactory state of affairs for Czechoslovak Catholics suddenly became intolerable and the Vatican announced that in December it would be holding talks with the Prague leadership over new episcopal appointments. With the resulting upsurge in domestic and foreign interest in the state of the Czechoslovak Church the time was right for a new, well-organised, religious rights campaign.

Predictably, criticism of the petition has come from certain quarters within the country, including sections of the Catholic clergy. The pro-government priests' association, *Pacem in Terris*, to which up to one tenth of Czechoslovak priests belong, was quick to condemn what it called the "unsanctioned" action of the laity. In Slovakia, where people have been arrested for collecting signatures for the petition, two temporary diocesan administrators, Onderko and Belak, who belong to *Pacem in Terris*, have even gone so far as to ban priests in their sees from mentioning the petition to their parishioners. Defiance of this ban could result in offending priests having their licences withdrawn. Yet in other dioceses the collection of signatures is going on undeterred.

By far the most bitter attack on the

petition has come from the Czechoslovak party dailies, *Rudé Právo* and *Pravda*. In joint articles on 11 and 20 February they accuse "illegal church structures" of drawing up the document in collusion with "bourgeois centres" in the West. They cast doubt on the authenticity of the Cardinal's letter supporting the action and then go on to accuse him of sending followers to Slovakia to obtain signatures by deception. The articles name Navrátil as the organiser of the petition and state that his object was to "hinder the progress" of talks between the state and the Vatican. In their reply, the organisers of the campaign refute allegations of deception. They maintain that the state authorities were informed of the petition and insist that the Cardinal's

letter is genuine. "But even if it were not," they say, "we are quite capable of judging for ourselves the religious situation in this country." In their own words the aim of the petition was to demonstrate to Cardinal Tomášek that he is not a "general without troops". This the organisers have evidently achieved. What remains to be seen is what, if any, impact the believers' action will have on the regime's future treatment of the Czechoslovak Catholic Church. Yet even if the state does not satisfy the believers' demands, the petition has shown a unity of purpose within the laity which must reassure the Cardinal and alarm the leadership.

*Compiled by members of
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A New Primate: A New Policy?

Over the past two years the Hungarian Bishops' Conference has received an infusion of fresh blood. Seven of Hungary's 11 Catholic dioceses have new bishops, four of whom were new to the Bishops' Conference. The new Primate, László Paskai was consecrated as Archbishop of Esztergom on 26 April 1987 in succession to the late Cardinal Lékai, who died in June 1986. The Archbishoprics of Kalocsa and Eger were filled by László Dankó and István Seregély respectively in June 1987. Endre Gyulay was appointed to the see of Szeged-Csanád, József Szendi to Veszprém, Isidor István Marosi to Vác and István Konkoly to Szombathely.

Pope John Paul II's selection of Paskai to succeed Cardinal Lékai caused little surprise. At the time of his appointment Paskai, then 59 years old, was one of the youngest

and fittest among the country's mostly elderly and ailing prelates. He was also a man of experience. Paskai was awarded a doctorate in philosophy in 1952, and for many years he taught and held administrative posts at the Catholic seminaries at Szeged and Budapest. Before his appointment as coadjutor Archbishop of Kalocsa in 1982, Paskai served for three years as Bishop of Veszprém in western Hungary.

But above all, Paskai was known to be the favoured candidate of the Hungarian state. While coadjutor Archbishop of Kalocsa he acted as the chairman of the public affairs organ of the Hungarian Catholic Church, *Opus Pacis*, where he actively supported the government's foreign and domestic policy. Immediately following the interment of Cardinal Lékai, Paskai was elected Chairman of the Bishops'