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Church history through the eyes of a catacombs priest

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tIf history is really biography, then the stories of remarkable Catholics such as Fr. Petr Pit?ha, an intellectual-turned-catacombs priest who helped keep the faith alive during the dark days of Communist oppression, are a fascinating way to narrate church history in this part of the world.

tSecretly ordained in 1969, Pit?ha ministered in the shadows for two decades, teaching religious education in private apartments and hearing confessions disguised as friendly chats. His priesthood was a carefully guarded secret; his own father, mother and brother didn?t even know until after the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

tPit?ha, now 71, sat down Friday afternoon for a conversation with NCR. He was ordained clandestinely in Holland in 1969, after it became clear that the brief hope of the 1968 ?Prague Spring? was giving way to another cycle of brutality.

tAn accomplished linguist and professor of culture, Pit?ha went on to serve as Minister of Education in the Czech Republic during the early 1990s. Today he says Mass, celebrate the sacraments and teaches the faith to a small circle of people, but otherwise he doesn?t hold himself out as a priest; he receives visitors to his Prague apartment, near the famed hrad, or castle, still the seat of government, vested as a ?minister? in the secular rather than sacred sense of the term.

tThough Catholicism was a target all across the Soviet sphere, in some ways the crackdown was most severe in the former Czechoslovakia. The church was in the unenviable situation of being strong enough that it represented a threat, but not so strong that it could protect its autonomy as in Poland. Monasteries were shut down and religious orders suppressed, some priests were jailed and others were given jobs as factory workers and window-washers, while still others chose to collaborate with a government-sponsored Pacem in Terris association.

Ordinary pastors who mostly managed to stay out of the fray were subjected to constant surveillance. (Pit?ha says the joke at the time was that the spy was the only person who never missed Mass!)

tIn that environment, the Vatican gave bishops permission to secretly ordain priests without prior papal approval. Many were married, in order not to arouse government suspicion. That would later create headaches for Rome; post-1989, the Vatican created a special Eastern Rite diocese into which these married priests were incorporated, even though the vast majority had never been part of any Eastern church. (The most famous headache bred by the catacombs church was created by the late Bishop Felix Davidek, who once ordained a woman, Ludmilla Javorova, in order to minister to female prisoners in the camps. I met Javorova, whose ordination the Vatican obviously does not recognize, in 1999 in her apartment in Brno.)

tServing as a clandestine priest posed a serious risk. Had he been caught, Pit?ha could have faced up to 25 years

in prison. That helps explain why his priesthood was a secret not only from the Czech bishops ? Pit?ha never even met the legendary Cardinal Franti?ek Tomá?ek, who led the church during this period ? but also from his own family.

tPit?ha says that the catacombs forged a special kind of priesthood, one with a deep understanding of life in the lay world ? a kind of spirituality in which the priesthood isn?t simply tacked on to the lay state, but arises from it and is expressed through it. At the same time, he candidly admits that the Wild West spirit of the time, canonically speaking, bred a fair bit of craziness too.

tI spoke with Pit?ha about his experiences under the Communists, as well as his views on issues facing the Catholic church in the Czech Republic today.

Tell me a bit of your story.

I?m an academic person. I dislike saying ?intellectual,? but I suppose that?s what I am. I?ve spent most of my career at Charles University. In 1969, I was also secretly ordained and I was a priest in the underground church. After the Velvet Revolution, I was the Minister of Education for some time.

After 1989, did you continue to act as a priest?

Well, I continued all my activities I had before, but I did not become what we might call a normal parish priest. I stay a little bit out of ?the system.? I?m still incardinated in Holland, where I was ordained. In a sense, I?m a foreign priest. I continue to say Mass, hear confessions, and so on. Of course, now I can do everything officially, so I go and help when I?m asked. But I don?t have any formal pastoral position.

Why were you ordained in Holland?

For two reasons: first, because it was safe, and second, because the ordination could be absolutely precise in terms of canon law. You know, many of the secret ordinations carried out in those days were somehow incorrect, spotty, in a canonical sense. Later, all these people had problems after the Velvet Revolution. Sometimes it went so far that the ordination was not fully valid.

I?m surprised you were able to travel to Holland in 1969.

I was considered a scientific expert in a field that was important to the regime. So from time to time, I was allowed to travel. I was a linguist, and in those days I was working on the concept of machine translation ? not just text, like on the Internet today, but man-to-machine communication.

Who ordained you?

Bishop Ernst, in Breda. [Bishop Hubertus Ernst, who led the Breda diocese from November 1967 to May 1992.] It was in secret, with two witnesses from our clergy and two witnesses from Holland. No one else was present.

What was it like being a priest in those circumstances?

Of course, it was a time that required a very strong vocation. I was blessed to have such a vocation, and I followed it.

What concretely did you do? You couldn?t just celebrate Sunday Mass in a parish.

Of course not. The whole situation was very complicated, and very bizarre. The Communist regime kept part of the church?s activities, so to say, out in the open air, but definitely not free. Any person could go to Mass, go to

the sacraments, and listen to preaching, either Catholic or Protestant. Nevertheless, this part of the church was under strict scrutiny ? There was the Pacem in Terris movement, but they were more or less collaborators. Even the normal parish priest was watched permanently. The joke was that the spy was the only person who never missed Mass! So in those circumstances, those of us who wanted to be able to keep the faith alive outside of control by the regime had to be very, very careful.

Did the average parish priest know who his spy was?

Sometimes, but not always. Of course, there wasn?t just one spy in most cases. One of the terrible qualities of the regime is that everyone was always pressured to inform on everyone else.

How did you minister?

You have to remember that it was dangerous just to be Catholic in those days. Children from Catholic families couldn?t get into the universities. Practicing Catholics were marginalized in terms of getting jobs. Priests were sacred, not just for themselves but also for their people. Consequently, some of them disliked going into a deep analysis of life. For me, therefore, the main activity was to teach children and young people.

Where would you do that?

In somebody?s flat. These were of course the famous ?home seminaries.? But I wasn?t doing it for intellectuals. I was always interested in working with very ordinary, low-educated people.

If you had been discovered, what would have happened?

The sentence for this activity changed over time. When I started, it was 20 to 25 years in prison. By the time I finished, it wasn?t so bad ? only four to eight years, something like that.

Were you ever discovered?

No, thank God. I was part of a small group of priests, and I was the only one who had no trouble at all. There were many who spent years in jail, and many who were interrogated by the police.

Tell me about this group.

You must understand that it was very difficult to do something like that alone. For many reasons, it was actually impossible. The reasons were psychological, theological, and simply human. So, we had a group where we could give advice to one another, helping each other in many, many things ? from the very simple everyday problems of life up to the greatest spiritual problems.

How many were you?

We were about twelve, in my group. Later on, there was sort of another wing, which included about twenty people. Of course there were many more underground priests doing similar things, but we had little contact with them. It was not good to have many contacts, because the more people who knew about you, the greater your risk. The secrecy went quite far. I know of one case, a special jewel of this work in secret, in which two brothers didn?t know about each other, that each of them was a priest. My own family didn?t know.

Many of the underground priests were married, in part by design, to create the appearance of normal family life. Were you married?

No. I could hardly be married, because I started my religious life when I was 19.

You couldn?t tell your parents or siblings that you had been ordained?

For parents, it would have been a terrific burden if they had known. For my brother, it was better not to know, because if something had happened with me, he would have been in a much better position.

After 1989, you obviously told your brother. Was he surprised?

No, not at all. He always thought I was crazy!

During this period, what sort of relationship did you have to the hierarchy? Were the bishops aware of you?

There was almost no relationship. I had contact with one of them only toward the very end, from around 1986, when we began the huge preparations to celebrate the millennium of the martyrdom of St. Adalbert of Prague. This was a very strong idea, I think, and a very strong movement. In those days, I had contact with one of the bishops.

So Cardinal [Franti?ek] Tomá?ek was not aware of what you were doing?

I never met him.

What about today? Do you have contacts with Cardinal [Miloslav] Vlk?

Not so much. I knew him as an old colleague from the faculty at the university, but I?ve had very little contact with him since 1989.

After the Velvet Revolution, I decided not to be a hero. You can?t imagine how many heroes appeared after 1989! I discussed the matter with my bishop in Breda, and we decided that I would not promote my priesthood. I would continue with all my activities, but the only people I would tell about my priesthood would be my boss if I were ever given a new position in my professional life. This happened twice. First, it happened when I changed faculties at the university. I was on the mathematics faculty, but after 1989 I was asked to prepare a system of civic education, meaning education for democracy, and teacher training to go along with that. I went to the education faculty, and I had to inform the dean of the faculty of my situation. The second instance was when I was chosen to be the Minister of Education, and then of course my background was broadly publicized.

How were you appointed Minister of Education?

The story goes that in the elections of 1992, a coalition of four center-right parties won, and each party had a Minister of Education in mind. They quarreled about it so much that finally they came to a very strange solution. They decided to ask someone who wasn?t a member of any of those parties, but who understood the matter. It was an elegant solution, but ? to be an expert, a ?technocrat,? in a political cabinet isn?t so easy.

Are you a member of a political party?

No, none at all.

Would you describe yourself as either liberal or conservative?

Oh, I?m a paleo-conservative in the eyes of many people. But you know, I believe that I?m somehow outside these categories, that I?m simply a man of reason.

Did the experience of being a church in the catacombs produce a deeper faith here? You know the old saying, that the church is always at its best when it suffers.

To give a correct answer, I must say that on the one hand, the experience formed great personalities with a profound faith. It was necessary to put aside any formal supports, and to shape one?s spirituality as an ordinary person. Therefore the priesthood became an authentic dimension of one?s humanity, a real spirit of life, not just something sustained by the exterior trappings of the office.

On the other hand, of course this pressure produced a lot of strange people. Sometimes they could be very fundamentalistic, and sometimes they were split into a kind of schizophrenia. They lived their ordinary life during the working hours in some job, and then they switched into a kind of monastic life. More or less, they were crazy. They really lived two completely separate types of lives. I knew guys who lived very quietly, working in a factory someplace, and when they came home they would change into a soutane and walk around as if they were some kind of abbot. Then if somebody rang the door bell, they would quickly change back into their street clothes. The whole situation bred a special kind of insanity.

The greatest thing about the experience of being in the catacombs is that we discovered a special kind of priesthood. We learned what it is to be a profound lay man and still be a priest.

What do you mean?

In many cases, religious life is something added to your other life, but it doesn?t come through it as a real dimension of everything. I discovered that everyday life is a prolonged liturgy. For example, my parents were old and I had to take care of them. I discovered that just preparing food, and setting the table, is a kind of liturgy. Saying Mass became just the highest knot, so to speak, in this rope that bound my life together. This changed my whole life into something miraculous. I found enormous depth in even the most ordinary and boring activity.

I?m tempted to ask if you?re part of Opus Dei, because that sounds a lot like their vision of the ?sanctification of the ordinary.?

No, apart from that small group of priests I talked about, I was never part of any movement or anything like that. But you know, I believe that the Holy Spirit often pushes many people in a similar direction. For me, it was a great astonishment that after many, many years I read some literature, from Opus Dei and other groups, and found many of the same ideas that I had discovered on my own.

Let?s shift to the broader story of the church in the Czech Republic. How would you describe the situation of the church today?

One important question is the position of the church in society. I think that society doesn?t know what to do with the church, and the church doesn?t know what to do in society.

For fifty years, the church was a target of brutal attacks, and society accepted that as a heroic activity. The church had great prestige. Now, the church no longer plays an important role in social structures. It was a marginalized group of people, living to some extent outside the society. Now suddenly, this group became a member of society. It was like opening a ghetto. While the church was in a ghetto, the society walked around it and really had no idea what was going on inside ? so once the Catholics walked out of the ghetto, people didn?t know what to make of them. This is to say nothing about the general decline in education about religious matters. There are enormous blanks in the education system, and religion is one of the best examples. So now, the question many Czech ask is: What to do with these people? What is their position? Nobody knows.

On the one hand, there are enormous expectations of the church, but there really aren?t any possibilities to fulfill them.

What do you mean by ?enormous expectations??

This country is really in a great moral crisis. Who will help the society out of it?

What kind of crisis?

Our education is ruined, under the banners of positivist thinking, human rights, empathetic approaches to everybody, and a claim that everybody is equal. Our science is ruined, under the slogan of ?publish or perish.? People are publishing without any content, for the sake of their careers. Our medical care is in crisis, because the impact of efficiency is so great that there is no time to do ordinary human care. Our legal system is in crisis, because there are so many laws and so many lawyers that we are in a golden age of sophists. Anything is possible and everything is true, nobody cares about factual truth. We have a crisis in politics, because nobody cares about real issues but only some kind of scandals. It?s difficult to live this way.

Your point is that there is still a residual expectation that the church ought to have something to say about all this?

The general hope is that there will appear in society an authority that can bring the country back to reality, where black will be black and white will be white, instead of an endless scale of gray. Lilies will be white and smell nice, while mud will be dark and smell bad. Right now we?re living in a kind of madness in which there are some people for whom mud smells good!

Why hasn?t the church been able to do this?

Because the majority within the church tried to enter the life of the society, and from time to time, more and more, is slipping into what?s not good in the society. For example, there?s almost a taboo against speaking really hard truths because it could provoke some kind of angry reaction from very important people.

It also doesn?t help that the church often speaks in a language that?s not fully understandable, about things which are so abstract and specifically religious than nobody cares what it?s saying. What?s important is that people are hoping for some prophetic voice to say, if you continue in this way of behavior ? for example, not telling the truth about the quality of children being formed in our schools ? you will reach these consequences. That?s what the church isn?t doing enough.

From the outside, the Czech Republic has a reputation as a very secularized society.

That?s true, it is.

So if the church were to speak forcefully, would anyone listen?

If representatives of the church were to speak about prominent secular problems, in a reasonable way, they would have an enormous audience. Any society must be built on certain solid stones, and what?s at stake right now are precisely those stones. Of course, in European countries, are stones come from Christianity. I think, for example, that we must speak in very simple formulae about the Decalogue, because that?s what the whole society needs.

What about the internal life of the church today?

Religiosity is a very strange phenomenon. I think that when people feel in danger, they will come to a place where they feel safer ? not fully safe, perhaps, but safer.

By that, you mean the church?

Yes.

What danger are you talking about?

Life in this country is dangerous, in every sense. We are permanently in the hands of liars, thieves, and killers. After a Cold War, we are living in a Flaming Peace.

So you believe that paradoxically, as civil society deteriorates, people will increasingly look to the church?

Yes, and there are certain interesting phenomena in that regard. Statistics show that about thirty percent or more of baptisms in this country are young adults, not infants. These young people are searching for something, to offer them ground for a more reasonable, calmer life. They find it in the church. If you compare numbers of baptisms, it?s almost forty percent that are young adults these days. That?s a revolution.

Second, the activity of the church is highly prized in the army, in prisons, and in care for young offenders. Its ministry is respected by the secular society.

What hope do you have for the pope?s trip? Can it make any difference?

Yes, I?m full of hope for it. First, he is a man who offers very precise formulations of basic problems. He will encourage a church which is also a little bit tired. Most probably, he will speak about general social issues and not about church problems. All of that is promising.

Second, this visit has been prepared differently from all the previous papal visits. The preparation has been better. The church really worked on pastoral preparation. For example, they put out two quite impressive little booklets about the trip. There have also been unusually strong and precise pastoral letters from the bishops, about basic problems of the whole society ? not accusing anybody, but saying that we are in a difficult situation and we must make a choice. These letters had a huge impact, even in broader society.

Will the broader society be paying attention to the pope this weekend?

Yes, I think it will. In that sense, it?s an enormous opportunity for the church to begin addressing those expectations we talked about a moment ago.

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