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Czech believers find islands of hope in a secular sea

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Even in the most religiously flourishing corners of the world — sub-Saharan Africa, for example, or the American Bible belt — one can always find pockets of secularism. By the same token, even in the most thoroughly secularized zones of the planet, one can also find signs of religious life if you know where to look.

The Czech Republic, by every measure a remarkably secular society, offers a case in point. Even here, there are intriguing signs that the Catholic church, which often seems little more than a shell of its former self, nevertheless has a pulse.

Certain the overall picture here is not in dispute. According to Austrian sociologist Fr. Paul Zulehner, the Czech Republic is, along with the former East Germany, the zone of the former Soviet sphere where state-sponsored atheism had its greatest success. Today, some 60 percent of Czechs say they have no religious affiliation. All this has clearly taken its toll on the church. In the Archdiocese of Prague each year, more priests die than are ordained.

The general secular climate means that popular enthusiasm for this weekend's visit of Pope Benedict XVI is not exactly sky-high. The *Prague Post* sent a reporter and photographer into the streets and found little interest; the paper drew the conclusion that the visit "will create a lot of smoke at the top but little fire among the populace."

The Associated Press likewise quoted Kveta Tomasovicova, a 56-year-old librarian, to the effect that this visit is "just a waste of money — a useless investment" at a time when salaries are on the decline.

Yet experts on the Catholic scene in the Czech Republic point to two indicators which suggest rays of hope.

First, they say, a small but striking cohort among young Czechs appears to be breaking with the secularist dogma of their parents and embracing religion. Fr. Petr Pitřha, who was secretly ordained during the era of Communist oppression and who later became the Czech Minister of Education after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, notes that some 30 to 40 percent of all baptisms each year are not of infants but young adults.

These young people are searching for something, to offer them ground for a more reasonable, calmer life, Pitřha told NCR on Friday. They find it in the church.

This is a revolution, Pitřha said.

Fr. Jan Balík, press coordinator for the papal visit, said that a well-identified group of young people, which he estimated to represent about 10-20 percent of the youth population in the Czech Republic, is identified in some manner or another with the Catholic church.

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That identification, Balík argued, is reflected in roughly 1,500 baptisms of young adults every year.

The younger generation as a whole grows toward further secularization, but there is a significant group interested in spirituality, he said.

Two of those young believers will address Pope Benedict XVI on Monday, when he visits Stará Boleslav: Marie Lukešová, a 23-year-old student of both pharmaceuticals and religious education; and Vladislav Janoušovec, a 27-year-old teacher of German and history. Among other things, both plan to reflect on their experiences of attending World Youth Days.

Another sign of hope cited by local observers is that the fact that church-run ministries, such as the pastoral care of the armed forces, 80 church-run schools across the country, and prison ministry, especially work with youth offenders, are highly esteemed in the broader society. Perceived successes in those areas, confirmed by recent national opinion polls, have won the church new respect, observers say.

Though admittedly tentative, such indicators give at least some Czech Catholics hope that the faith will survive the subtle assaults of secularism, just as it endured the more overt hostility of Communism.

If representatives of the church were to speak about prominent secular problems, in a reasonable way, they would have an enormous audience, Pitřha said. 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, the stones come from Christianity.

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