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Atti

della conferenza organizzata dall'Ambasciata della Repubblica di Polonia presso la Santa Sede
in collaborazione con la Pontificia Accademia delle Scienze
nell'anno della canonizzazione di Giovanni Paolo II
e del 25° anniversario dell'Annus mirabilis in Polonia e in Europa centro-orientale

Vaticano, 6 giugno 2014



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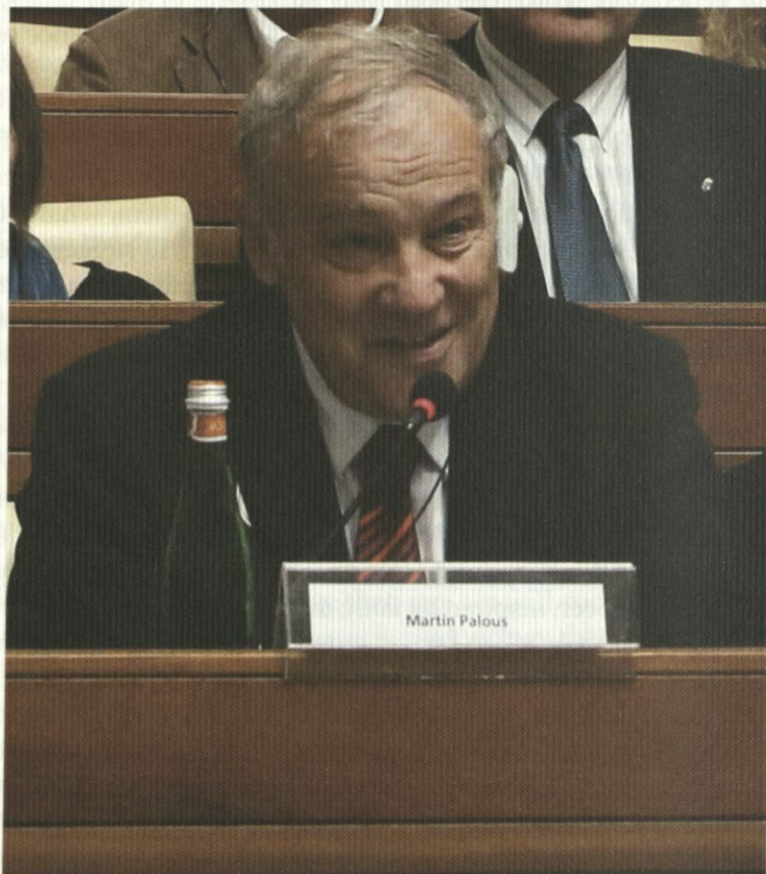
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MARTIN PALOÚŠ

A Czech chemist, philosopher, sociologist and jurist. Was one of the first signatories of Charter 77, and spokesman of groups promoting the rights of man, co-founder of the Civic Forum, Member of the National Assembly 1990, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. Ambassador of the Czech Republic in the USA 2001-2005. Later Permanent Representative at the UN 2006. A university professor, he presently teaches at Florida International University.

Testimony from the Czech Republic*

Eminencies, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen!

IT IS, INDEED A DISTINCT HONOR FOR ME to participate personally in this conference focused on the role of the Catholic Church, headed by Pope Saint John Paul II, in the events of the 1970s and 1980s which resulted in the fall of Communism in our part of the world during the *Annus Mirabilis* of 1989, and to be entrusted to serve here as a witness from the Czech Republic.

First of all I would like wholeheartedly to thank the organizers, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and The Embassy of Poland to the Holy See, for promoting this august and friendly gathering here, in the seat of the Academy – an amazing place of learning, reflection and dialogue in the middle of the Vatican gardens.

I have to admit right away: it is not easy for me to be given the floor after a Polish witness, the founder of “Solidarność”, and former President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa.

Two days ago, on June 4, we commemorated the 25th anniversary of the first free elections in Poland – and obviously not only in Poland, but in the whole Soviet block! It was a signal, good news indeed, which couldn't be ignored and remain unnoticed by all the other nations which had been living for decades behind the “iron curtain”. It was a clear message for them that the era of totalitarianism – imposed on them by the Cold War; keeping them in slavery and morally corrupting whole generations; not allowing their members to freely express their political will in spite of the name “people's democracy”, given to this form of government by the communist ideologues – was coming to an end!

There is no doubt that throughout the whole period of the 1970s and the 1980s it was always Poland where the flag of resistance against the communist

* An abbreviated version of this lecture was delivered at the conference “La Chiesa nel momento di svolta degli anni 80 e 90 in Europa Centro-Orientale” on June 6, 2014 in the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in Vatican.

tyranny was raised first and kept higher than anywhere else; that it was again the struggling Poles, leaders by example and inspiration, who decisively helped all other East and Central European nations to achieve the same thing, following their lead after a series of victorious revolutions bursting out one after another in their countries.

And yesterday, a day later, I had an opportunity to see the Rome premiere of a really great movie of Andrzej Wajda – “*Wałęsa. Man of Hope*”. I realized again, how unique and irreplaceable was the role of this man in our more recent historical events; how much not only Poles, but we Eastern and Central Europeans in general owe to him for his personal contribution to our own liberation. Wasn’t it our hopelessness and resignation – and not only the brute power of our slave-masters – that kept us so long in our chains? Wasn’t it the Polish “*Solidarność*” created by this man of hope that demonstrated to us that we can do something, too, in spite of our seemingly hopeless situation? Wasn’t it his Polish inspiration that made us realize that we also are able to say no to the devil, to resist the tyranny, to take concerted action and change our lot? So President Wałęsa, thank you very much, once again, for your courage, faith and determination!

II

Let me use this limited time I have been assigned for my Czech testimony to take you as quickly as I can through our own history in the 1970s and the 1980s leading up to our Velvet Revolution – which started after the brutal attack of police anti-riot forces on the participants of the demonstration in Prague on November 17, was followed by the demise of the Communist Government on December 3, the election of Václav Havel as Czechoslovak President on December 29, and was crowned by our first free Parliamentary Elections on June 8 and 9, 1990. I will break it down into several distinct periods and try to highlight briefly its several milestones, with special focus on the role of Catholic Church.

1968

This account must begin with the reminder of the Prague Spring. It started in January when Alexander Dubček surprisingly replaced Antonín Novotný as First Secretary of the Communist Party’s Central Committee, and launched the process of democratization of a totalitarian system of government which communist rule had been imposing on us for the past two decades. It was terminated eight months later by the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies led by the Soviet Union, “invited” by an undisclosed group of communist functionaries with the intention of stopping such a “counter-revolution”.

If the project to endow socialism with a “human face”, carried through by Dubček’s “progressive” wing in the communist leadership, had brought a temporary breath of freedom into our society and even roused false hopes that de-

spite all ideological prognostications we were not doomed to live in the "Soviet paradise" forever, the process of "normalization" which started immediately after the arrival and under the supervision of the Soviet military forces, threw the citizens of Czechoslovakia into a state of resignation and hopelessness. Some people decided they had had enough of socialism of any kind and left the country. The vast majority of those who stayed on didn't see any other alternative for themselves other than to start again to play the usual and well-known survival games, as they had done successfully in the past, adjusting themselves flexibly and creatively to the changing circumstances.

1975

The new leadership of the party and the state – as the standard official phrase went in all East Central European one-party systems – had full reason to believe that the policy of normalization under their watch was being implemented successfully and effectively; that its main objective – to again win the hearts and minds of people temporarily poisoned by dangerous, counter-revolutionary ideas – had been successfully achieved. The thorough screening of the whole society which had just ended, not only had purged all its governing bodies of all reactionary or revisionists elements which managed to seize power in the "years of crisis." It also showed that most of the average citizens who had been demonstrating their firm and immutable allegiance to the "ideals of January" not long before were ready to accept the "social contract" generously offered to them by the new rulers, and to coordinate themselves with a new situation.

The whole political machinery seemed to work again as smoothly as it had in the good old days before the counter-revolution hit. The hard-liners were thus triumphant and their interpretation of the 1968 events monopolized the public sphere. The whole opposition they had been confronted with in the recent past – either in the Communist Party or outside of it – was simply silenced and entirely disappeared.

Only very few people were ready to break the deathly silence from time to time and express publicly their opinions dissenting from the official "party line". One of them was Václav Havel, a playwright never associated with the Communist Party, who wrote an open letter to its leader, Dr. Gustáv Husák, to alert him about what he was observing throughout a "normalized" Czechoslovak society. The matter of his concern was a deep rift between the outside behavior and the inner beliefs of most Czechs and Slovaks – no longer articulating their own convictions in public, but driven to agree with the regime by nothing else than their own fears; not telling the truth when expressing their political views, but being forced constantly to lie and trying desperately to get used to it. According to Havel, the success of normalization was in fact not a success at all, but on the contrary, a big failure. What can be the long-term result of such an existentially humiliating situation for Czechoslovak citizens, he asked

Dr. Husák. And immediately he gave his own answer – a crisis, even deeper and more radical than the one which had just been seemingly overcome, with unpredictable consequences. In conclusion he wrote: “As a citizen of this country, I hereby request, openly and publicly, that you and the leading representatives of the present regime seriously consider the matters to which I have tried to draw your attention, that in their light you assess the degree of your historic responsibility, and act accordingly.”

A few months later, the same Dr. Husák – who in the meantime had become President of Czechoslovakia – added his signature to the Final Act of the Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe, which in its “third basket” declared the commitment of participating states to respect human rights and the fundamental freedoms of their citizens, and launched the so-called “Helsinki process”.

1977

On January 6, the creation of Charter 77, signed by 242 Czechoslovak citizens, was publicly announced. According to its original declaration it was “a loose, informal and open association of people of various shades of opinion, faiths and professions, united by the will to strive individually and collectively for the respect of civic and human rights in our own country and throughout the world².” The legal basis for Charter 77’s future activities was the entry into force of two major United Nations human rights covenants³ (published in the Czechoslovak Register of Laws No. 120 of October 13, 1976) and the President’s signature on the Final Act mentioned above.

However, the reason why the signatories of Charter 77 – coming indeed from all walks of life: Christians of various denominations, Jews, ex-Communists expelled from the party for their revolt in 1968, independent liberal intellectuals and quite a few young people with no specific background, creed, goals or expectations – decided to join this initiative was not political but, exactly as Havel had predicted in his letter to Dr. Husák, simply existential. The message they were sending to the Czechoslovak authorities was loud and clear: We have had enough. We cannot remain silent, with hypocrisy as an accepted norm in today’s Czechoslovakia, where all basic human rights “exist, regrettably, on paper alone⁴ and so many people have become “victims of a virtual apartheid.”⁵

Here is how philosopher Jan Patočka, who together with Václav Havel and Jiří Hájek (minister for Foreign Affairs in 1968) became one of the three Charter 77 spokespersons, characterized the fundamental objective of the Charter 77

1. V. HAVEL: “Dear Dr. Husák”, in: *Open Letters. Selected Writings 1965-1990*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991, Selected and Edited by Paul Wilson, p. 83.
2. Quoted from the English version of the *Manifesto of Charter 77* in the Library of Congress (http://rs6.loc.gov/frd/cs/czechoslovakia/cs_appnd.html).
3. The “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” and the “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights”.

movement and defined the concept of human rights it was standing for. Because of the central importance of his argument, I will quote from him at length. What Charter 77 was aiming at was, according to Patočka, simply "to bring to everyone's clear consciousness the truths of which we are all in some sense aware [...]. The concept of human rights is nothing but the conviction that states and society as a whole also consider themselves to be subject to the sovereignty of moral sentiment, that they recognize something unqualified above them, something that is bindingly sacred and inviolable even for them, and that they intend to contribute to this end with the power by which they create and ensure legal norms [...]. Participants in Charter 77 do not take upon themselves any political rights or functions, nor do they want to be a moral authority or "the conscience" of society; their efforts are aimed exclusively at cleansing and reinforcing the awareness that a higher authority does exist, to which they are obliged, individually in their conscience, and to which states are bound by their signatures on important international covenants; that they are bound not only by expediency, according to the rules of political advantage or disadvantage, but that their signatures there mean that they accept the rule that politics are indeed subject to law and that law is not subject to politics."⁶

1978

On the spring of the year when Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope John Paul II (on October 16) a debate was taking place in the Charter 77 circles on how to proceed in the general climate of hostility fostered by the communist regime and in the midst of its on-going repressions against the dissidents. Václav Benda, one of the Catholics among them, wrote a text entitled "Parallel Polis"⁷ which drew a lot of attention and stirred further discussions. It pointed to an important dimension not articulated sufficiently in the moral reasoning of Jan Patočka, who died only a few weeks after Charter 77 came into existence. The proposed dialogue on human rights with the government, stated Benda, hadn't taken place, and it was highly unlikely that it would in the foreseeable future. What the initiative of Charter 77 had managed instead, was to open a certain independent public space, which had not existed before in our society stricken by the totalitarian plague. It was this public space that should be not only defended, but gradually expanded further, with all the means at Charter 77's disposal.

In the summer, Czech and Polish dissidents organized the first clandestine meeting in the mountains on the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland.

4. *Manifesto of Charter 77*, op. cit.

5. *Ibid.*

6. J. PATOČKA, "What Charter 77 is, and What it is Not", in: *The Great Lie. Classic and Recent Appraisals of Ideology and Totalitarianism*, ed. by F. Flagg Taylor IV, ISI Books, Wilmington Delaware, 2011, pp. 457-458.

7. V. BENDA, *The Great Lie. Classic and Recent Appraisals of Ideology and Totalitarianism*, op. cit., pp. 460-476.

They released a joint declaration and agreed to communicate and cooperate on a regular basis. One of the first projects agreed upon was a book of essays written by authors from both sides, to be published by the "samizdat" (in both Czech and Polish independent and unofficial "publishing houses", distributing their production within the circle of friends and supporters, but also reaching out to an ever growing segment of the population).

In October, Václav Havel wrote for it his famous text "The Power of the Powerless" which was, and actually still is perceived as a kind of intellectual basis for anti-totalitarian dissent.

1979

In May of the year of Pope John Paul II's first visit to his motherland, in which he addressed Poles by uttering his famous "Do not be afraid!", a wave of repressions hit the Czechoslovak "parallel polis." Václav Benda, Václav Havel and eight other members of the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted were arrested. However, this didn't eliminate the problem which the government had to deal with when the "Helsinki process", after the first follow-up conference in Belgrade (October 1977 – March 1978), got into full swing. The new people stepped in immediately to replace those who had been arrested. All Charter 77 activities went on and even intensified. Cardinal František Tomášek, the head of Czech Catholic Church, whose original relationship with the Charter 77 had not been very positive, opened up (apparently inspired or even instructed by the new Pope) discrete communication channels with the Catholics among the Charter 77 signatories and gave the green light to the initiatives within the Church supporting the victims of repressions.

1980-1984

Since the Polish dissidents became the main international partners of the Czechs and Slovaks participating in Charter 77 activities – as a result of which the changing circumstances in Poland came to significantly affect the Czechoslovak situation – I need to mention first, albeit telegraphically, what was happening there during this turbulent period.

On August 31, 1980, "Solidarność", the first trade union not controlled by the Communist Party within the Soviet block, was created in the Gdansk Shipyard, and Lech Wałęsa became its president. It was attracting more and more people, its branches started to mushroom all over Poland. In September 1981 the number of "Solidarność" members reached almost 10 million – nearly one third of all workers in the country! By the end of 1981 "Solidarność" grew into a really powerful political organization in a country stricken by a devastating economic crisis, and started to threaten the constitutionally guaranteed leading role of the ruling party.

On December 13, 1981 General Jaruzelski declared Martial Law. Thousands of "Solidarność" activists, including almost all of its leaders, were detained and its activities immediately banned. Normal public life disappeared overnight in Poland; many people were sentenced to jail for political activities, many others emigrated. "Solidarność", no matter how paralyzed, however, didn't cease to exist and turned itself into a clandestine organization, disseminating information, publishing journals and books, distributing financial aid to the victims and their families, still reaching out to the whole Polish population. Martial law was ended on July 22, 1983, but many severe restrictions it had imposed on Poles still remained in effect.

In June 1983, still with the martial law in power, but in the atmosphere of expectation that it would end soon, Pope John Paul II visited Poland for the second time.

In December 1983, Lech Wałęsa, released from detention, received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo.

So what was happening in Czechoslovakia during these years? The persecution of dissidents continued on a daily basis, one campaign by the secret police followed another, in a similar way to Poland. The life of the "parallel polis" – and again like in Poland – went on and on in all its available forms: human rights advocacy, assistance to the victims of oppression, distribution of unbiased information through the network of independent bulletins, cultural activities, "flying universities"⁸, and other forms of independent education. The contacts with the Polish partners, cooperation in the context of the "Helsinki process" and the regular exchange of information also continued as it had been originally agreed.

Christians were well represented in all these operations. Each year one of them served as a Charter 77 spokesperson and under their watch the Charter was also issuing various documents criticizing the constant and systematic violations of religious freedoms. The Catholic Church became step by step an important player in the field of anti-totalitarian activities, bringing its spiritual message to the on-going independent public debate.

What was quite striking and thus often discussed within Charter 77, was, of course, the size and nature of Czechoslovak dissenting activities compared to Poland. The number of Charta 77 signatories never reached more than two or at best three thousand. Our "parallel polis" was rather a ghetto of open-minded intellectuals and not, as in Poland, a real and effective social movement.

But even here the Latin proverb *exempla trahunt* started to prove its validity. The letter inviting the Pope to visit Czechoslovakia sent to Rome in April of 1984 was signed by 17,000 people, the pilgrimages, the "outdoor activities" of the Church started to attract more and more members of the younger generation.

8. Expl.

1985

The major international event of the year, with crucial implications for future developments in Czechoslovakia, happened in Moscow. After two successors to Leonid Brežnev – Andropov and Chernenko, both of whom died one after the other – the third one, Mikhail Gorbachev after being elected Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, announced his plan, which was certainly not very welcome to our conservative leadership. It was “*pere-stroika*” and “*glasnost*”, two programmatic goals which were to change the Soviet system profoundly and make it more effective, especially in its economic performance.

Paradoxically, the new policies in the Soviet Union didn’t have an immediate effect in Czechoslovakia, presented by the proponents of “normalization” as one of the most loyal advocates of the Soviet example and leadership. One of their essential components was the departure from the so-called Brežnev doctrine⁹, which had justified sending troops to Czechoslovakia in 1968 to defend socialism in the whole region under Soviet control. “*Eto vaše delo*”, it is your business, was what Gorbachev told all his “junior partners” throughout the Eastern block in reaction to their inquiries on how to proceed in the future. And this message from Moscow was yet to have its historical implications in the years to come.

But there were other things, not necessarily directly related to the new Eastern winds that had started blowing towards Central Europe from Moscow, signaling that times were really changing and that people were starting to change with them. One of the most significant signals came from the environment of the Catholic Church. The Pilgrimage to Velehrad in the beginning of July to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the death of St Methodius, the apostle who brought the Christian faith to our lands, turned into a big anti-government demonstration. It was attended by approximately one hundred thousand people, who sent a very clear and strong signal to the present representatives of the Czechoslovak Government accompanying the Vatican delegation led by State Secretary Cardinal Casaroli. Finally, as one of the pilgrims aptly said, even Czechs and Slovaks started to reach the Polish numbers.

1986-1989

The trend which could be observed in the mid 1980s, continued and actually got stronger and stronger over time. The “parallel polis” created by Charter 77, in spite of the fact that the number of its really active signatories remained relatively low, was undergoing a remarkable change. The arrival of members of the younger generation raised the question of its “working methods” and *modus operandi*. Stronger political approaches were recommended and pushed for, instead of Pa-

9. Expl.

točka's Socratic moralities and Havel's "anti-political politics"¹⁰. Demonstrations on the largest possible scale, visible protests taking place in public, not only somewhere out there, but on the main squares and busy streets. New independent initiatives of all colors and tendencies appeared as alternatives to the 'ancient' Charter 77 initiative – the "grey zone" between the hard-core dissidents and the still state-coordinated mainstream population – started to grow, inhabited by those who felt the new winds blowing and were looking for their own place in the coming process of transformation.

The international context also reflected this sea of change. The spirit of "perestroika" coined by Mikhail Gorbachev couldn't be stopped at the Soviet borders and entered the Eastern zone still firmly controlled by those who would have preferred to keep the "status quo" and preserve the foundations of the existing social order. The Vienna follow-up meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (November 1986 - January 1989) introduced the concept of "human dimension" and strengthened the relevance of human rights questions, including the inputs of their defenders, in inter-state negotiations. Western diplomats intensified their contacts with Eastern and Central European dissidents and started quite openly supporting their full international "legitimization".

The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia also tried to find its unique role in this process. There were activities which were growing spontaneously from below, first of all the pilgrimages which became not the preserve of old, traditional believers, but an attractive option for the young, with its own place in society and in a world still seeking regeneration. A petition prepared by the hitherto unknown Moravian farmer Augustín Navrátil, "Suggestions to Catholics on how to Deal with the Situation of Believers" was signed by more than half a million Czechoslovak citizens. A "Decade of Spiritual Renewal" was launched by a group of Catholic activists, openly supported by the official hierarchy headed by Cardinal Tomášek, with a clear aim to add to the ongoing social transformation impelled by Charter 77, an important cultural and historical consciousness affecting the whole of the Czech nation. The canonization of Agnes, a Czech princess from the thirteen century, scheduled in Rome by the competent organs of the Holy See for autumn 1989, gave another impulse to a quite visible Catholic revival though, as it turned out later, this proved to be only temporary.

1989

And here only a couple of very brief comments on how *Annus Mirabilis* finally brought back our freedom.

Václav Havel had to spend another term – fortunately three months only – in jail as a result of the big Jan Palach demonstration, which took place in Prague in January.

10. Ref. to Havel's 1984 speech "Politics and Conscience".

The "Several Sentences" petition mobilized the "Grey Zone" in an unprecedented manner, so that even hard-liners in the Party Politburo had to get the message that something was going wrong with their leadership.

The Polish dissidents who had turned into members of Sejm after the election in June, visited Prague on 1st September. They visited their Czech colleagues with their brand new diplomatic passports and caused a headache to the Czechoslovak Secret Service.

Another signal of the end of an era was the East German emigrants passing through Prague in October, jumping over the fence of the German Embassy and later being taken by buses to the train station to travel to the West and leaving their socialist home behind.

The pilgrimage to Rome to witness the canonization of Agnes, in which tens of thousands of Czechs and Slovaks took part, mobilized the Czech Catholics in such a manner that quite naturally, headed by their shepherd, Cardinal Tomášek, they played their own, very specific and very important part in the Velvet Revolution.

III

To conclude, there still is an unfinished debate here: Who did it, after all? Was it Gorbachev and his American counterparts Reagan and Bush who made a new deal between themselves and agreed that the time had finally come to dismantle the political architecture guaranteed by the Soviet Union and the United States during the period of the Cold War in order to prevent the worst from happening – a nuclear conflict between the capitalist West and the socialist East? Or was it Walesa and Havel and other great Central and Eastern Europeans who managed finally to mobilize their nations to get rid of the totalitarian system which had ruined their lives for decades and deprived generations to freely pursue their happiness? Both schools of thought have certainly good arguments to use in this debate. As politicians of all ages and in all places know, their intentions and plans are just one thing. Good luck or fortune is certainly also what matters in human history. But what about providence, the will of God, the intervention of the Holy Spirit?



ENGLISH

