

■ CZECHOSLOVAKIA/4

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CZECHOSLOVAK-VATICAN ACCORD ON APPOINTMENT OF
BISHOPS

Summary: A first-step forward in Czechoslovakia's relations with the Vatican has been registered by an agreement on the appointment of four new bishops. This result of difficult and protracted negotiations shows evidence of compromise on both sides and, in addition, reflects recent policy shifts by both parties which accord with a policy of detente and a desire to settle outstanding questions in East-West relations.

After protracted negotiations between the Vatican and representatives of the Czechoslovak regime, a partial agreement has been reached and the appointment of four new bishops announced by the Vatican. Magr. Agostino Casaroli, head of the Vatican's Public Affairs Council (equivalent to a foreign ministry), went to Czechoslovakia personally to consecrate the four new bishops: (1) Josef Vrana, appointed apostolic administrator of the diocese of Olomouc and titular bishop of Osetia; Jan Passtor, named full bishop of Nitra, Slovakia; Jelinek Gebria, appointed apostolic administrator of Trnava and titular bishop of Decuriana; and Josef Perazzo, named full bishop of Banska Bystrica, Slovakia.

[1] RFE Special/News, 27 February 1973.

There will now be an apostolic presence in six of the country's thirteen religious provinces. The consecrations were the first since 1964, when Pope Paul named Frantisek Tomasek apostolic administrator of the Prague archdiocese following the release and exile of the imprisoned Cardinal Josef Beran, Archbishop of Prague, who died later in Rome. The last previous investiture in Czechoslovakia was that of Ambros Lasik, who was named bishop of Trnava in 1949 and died in 1969. (2)

Vatican sources described the negotiations with Czechoslovak officials as among the most difficult of recent times, especially in view of the limited results. They began in Rome on 13 November 1972, with the Czechoslovak side represented by Karel Kratoch, head of the Federal Secretariat of Church Affairs; Karel Hosale, director of ecclesiastical affairs in Slovakia; and Alois Tichy, minister-counselor of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Rome. The same team negotiated with Giovanni Cheli, chief assistant to Magr. Casaroli, and Angelo Sedano in Rome between 11 and 18 December 1972. Finally, during the week of 15 January 1973, Cheli visited Czechoslovakia and conducted negotiations first in Bratislava and then in Prague, during which final agreement on the four nominations was reached.

Josef Vraga, the new apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Olomouc, was born in Strahovice on 17 October 1905, and is Czech by origin. He was ordained in 1928 and worked as a teacher of religion at a gymnasium in Kromeriz, Moravia, between 1934 and 1940. In the years 1945 to 1948 he occupied political offices in the state administration in Moravia for the (Catholic) Czechoslovak People's Party, but ceased these activities after the communist take-over in February 1948. Between 1948 and 1963 he was administrator of an Olomouc monastery, and since 1963 has been vicar of the Olomouc chapter. He participated as a witness for the prosecution in the politically inspired trial of priests in late 1950. (3) Vraga was active in the regime-sponsored movement of peace priests at least since 1966, and in the past was considered an associate of the well-known peace priest and former minister of

(2) UPI, 3 March 1973.

(3) State Press, 2 December 1966.

Health, Josef Plojhar. After the August 1968 invasion he was one of the organizers of the revived, officially sponsored organization now known under the name Paces in Terris. He was elected chairman of Paces in Terris in the Czech lands in August 1970. (4) An office he is resigning from concurrently with his present appointment. On the occasion of the general elections in November 1971, Vrana made a public statement appealing to the population to participate, saying, among other things, that the elections would permeate the whole world: "what good class, political, and national relations we have in our country." (5) Within the framework of the compromise which has now been reached between the Vatican and the Czechoslovak regime, there is little doubt that Vrana's appointment should be seen as the result of regime pressure.

Jan Passtor, the new bishop of Nitra, was born on 27 January 1913 in Frievidza, and is Slovak by origin. Ordained in 1934, he served as chaplain in Blahoskovice, near Hodarovo, Ruthenia, between 1934 and 1937, obtained a doctorate in theology in the latter year, and worked as a teacher of religion in Bratislava between 1938 and 1940. He later obtained a doctorate in law in Bratislava, and served as a priest in Dublino nad Vahou in 1951 and 1954, and later in Jesenice and Nitra. Since June 1968 he has been vicar of the Nitra chapter. Passtor participated in a Paces in Terris meeting in early 1971, (6) and was at that time reputed to be acceptable to both the Church and the state as a candidate for a bishopric.

Julius Gabriel, born in Trnava's Mlynsky on 5 December 1913 and of Slovak origin, is the new apostolic administrator in Trnava. After completing his studies in Bratislava, he was ordained in 1938. He taught in Trnava between 1941 and 1950, and obtained a doctorate in natural sciences in 1944. Between

(4) Radio Prague and Getzko, 11 August 1971.

(5) Esselske Evening, 19 November 1971.

(6) See the Slovak Katolicka Evening, 11 January 1971.

1950 and 1965 he was a parish priest in several localities in Slovakia, and since 1969 he has been head of the apostolic administration in Trnava. In 1968 Gebria plainly sympathized with the progressive trend in the country. (7) At the beginning of 1971 he participated in a Fabian in Tarris meeting in Bratislava, (8) and he was at that time reputed to be acceptable to both the Church and the state as a candidate for a bishopric.

Josef Ferenc, named bishop of Banska Bystrica, was born in Povedna on 14 March 1910. He was ordained in 1932, and for the next 20 years was a professor of Latin and religion at Zvolen and Banska Bystrica. Thereafter until his present appointment, he was administrator of the parish of Martin in the Banska Bystrica diocese.

The consecration of the three new Slovak bishops took place in the cathedral in Nitra on March 3. Some 1,500 people witnessed the ceremony, and another 2,000 watched the bishop's procession as it passed through the streets. (9) The following day the Vatican "Foreign Minister," Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, traveled to Olomouc in Moravia to consecrate Mgr. Trnava. On March 5, Casaroli was received in Prague by Czechoslovak Deputy Prime Minister Matej Lacan, at a meeting also attended by Karel Husa. A communiqué stated that problems of relations between the Czechoslovak state and the Roman Catholic Church and questions of peaceful coexistence and understanding among nations were discussed. (10)

Speaking later in Rome of the favorable popular response to the ceremonies, Mgr. Casaroli remarked that he had been particularly struck by the "high number of young people who attended them." (11)

(7) Ibid., 26 May 1968.

(8) Ibid., 31 January 1971.

(9) UPI, 4 March 1973.

(10) APF, 5 March 1973.

(11) RFE Special/Rome, 7 March 1973.

Yet another action indicative of the improved climate was Pope Paul's announcement that Magr. Stepan Trochta, bishop of Litoměřice, had been named a cardinal at the last consistory, on 18 April 1969. Trochta's elevation had been in pectore, following an ancient tradition by which the pope can create cardinals without revealing their names if by doing so the interests of the Church or its faithful would be damaged. (12) Pope Paul did not disclose Magr. Trochta's elevation because of the tense relations that have existed between Prague and the Vatican, and the fear that such disclosure would prejudice the chances of improving them. Another reason was that the late Cardinal Josef Beran had been alive during the last consistory. (13)

This first step forward in Czechoslovak-Vatican relations shows evidence of compromise on both sides. Once agreement had been reached in principle to fill a number of vacant dioceses, negotiations centered on the appointments themselves. The Vatican has taken pains to stress that papal prerogatives have been respected in the appointment of the new Church officials. Casaroli's trip to Czechoslovakia was said to signify Rome's full endorsement of the new bishops. The Czechoslovak side, in an implicit defense of its own prerogatives, noted that the new Church functionaries had been appointed with the "tacite consent" of the Czech and Slovak governments, "on the basis of an agreement between Czechoslovakia and the Vatican." (14)

In view of his past co-operative association with the regime, Magr. Vrana's appointment elicited some controversy. Taking note of this in a press conference, a Vatican official said:

There has been some astonishment that among these new bishops there figured Magr. Vrana, an important member of the press priest movement before he resigned from it.

(12) Newter, 5 March 1971.

(13) Ibid.

(14) Radio Prague and Bratislava, 2 March 1971.

But in this case the Holy See took into consideration the valid pastoral achievements of Mgr. Vrana in his diocese. Moreover, it should be noted that he voluntarily resigned from any active participation in this movement as being incompatible with his episcopal mission.

- It should also be noted that a large number of clergy joined the Peace in Terris movement under pressure from state authorities and in order to avoid leaving the Church in Czechoslovakia without priests. Investigation by the Holy See had made it quite clear that Mgr. Vrana was certainly one of these. [15]

This effort to mitigate what are, in the Vatican's view, the reprovable aspects of Mgr. Vrana's earlier activities, and the stress on the fact that his performance of his pastoral duties constituted the grounds for his elevation, suggest that his nomination represented one of the compromises made by the Vatican. At the same time, the Vatican registered its disapproval of the politically inspired organization of the clergy in Czechoslovakia. Radio Vatican announced that Mgr. Vrana has resigned from the Peace in Terris group "because active participation in movements that are based only on the initiative of part of the clergy is irreconcilable with the episcopal function, in that the bishop is father and pastor of all the priests and the faithful." [16]

Of more overriding concern than the questionable political associations of Mgr. Vrana, and possibly of some of the other

[15] Vatican spokesman Federico Alessandrini, speaking at a Vatican press conference. (EFE Special/News, 27 February 1973.)

[16] Radio Vatican, as quoted in EFE Special/News, 27 February 1973.

nominess, (17) was the Vatican's concern over the inadequateness of the Church's administrative presence in Czechoslovakia, and the negative effect this has on Church activities. In commenting on the new appointments, Pope Paul said: "The Church was even on the point of losing its episcopal hierarchy. In Slovakia there were no bishops left." (18)

Furthermore, the Vatican's unspoken reservation about Hagr, Vrana were indicated by the fact that he was appointed apostolic administrator *ad nutum sanctoris sedis*, which means that should the Holy See have questions about his apostolic performance he could be removed from his position at the will of the pope.

The accord is in keeping with the Vatican's new-found readiness to come to terms with political realities in Eastern Europe, in the interests of preserving the Church's influence and extending its role. The modus vivendi that has been achieved with Czechoslovak authorities will, it is hoped, improve the religious climate by encouraging a policy under which more freedom of action will be permitted to the clergy in fulfilling their duties. Some hopes in future to fill more vacant dioceses, and eventually to resume the full diplomatic relations severed in 1950. (19)

(17) According to a report in the British Roman Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, Hagra, Reaktor and Gebria, along with Hagr, Vrana, were signatories of a September 1972 letter to party leader Gustav Husak which rejected as "outrageous" any criticism of the trials of Dubcek supporters that took place in the summer of 1970. The letter was sent by the Czech in Terris steering committee, and also described as false any claims that religious liberty in Czechoslovakia was restricted, a view which contrasts with familiar Vatican criticism of the party's interference in the country's religious life. (Reuter/Vatican City, 27 February 1973.)

(18) RFE Special/Rome, 28 February 1973.

(19) Reuter, 3 March 1973.

On the Czechoslovak side, the accord appears to indicate a rather sharp alteration in policy, coming as it does after four years of a highly restrictive attitude toward the Church's activities. It is interesting that the negotiations of November 1972 were reopened at Prague's request. (20) The changed attitude toward the Vatican is part of a conciliatory pattern in Czechoslovak foreign policy which has emerged over the last four to five months. Prague has signaled a greater readiness to reach more satisfactory relations through settlements with the United States, Austria, Yugoslavia, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The process is in its initial stages, and seems to have as its broader frame of reference the desire to improve or rehabilitate Czechoslovakia's international image. The Vatican accord is an example of this -- a bid to mitigate the international aspects of Church-state confrontation in the context of and as a corollary to the Kremlin's policy of reaching a general European settlement. While relations with the Vatican are not of central political importance in this process, they are an important symbolic indication of Eastern intentions. The new steps bring Prague more into line with allied party-states such as Poland and Hungary, which have preferred a policy of limited co-operation to confrontation with the Church. There can be little doubt that the Kremlin is an advocate of the former course.

There is good reason to believe that the regime has endorsed a policy of outright confrontation with the Church. The real questions are whether or not Prague's shift is only a cosmetic change in its foreign policy, and how salutary an effect it will have in ameliorating an internal policy of religious obstructionism. If, as the Vatican hopes, the conciliation of the four bishops marks the beginning of a new relationship with Czechoslovakia, it will succeed or founder in accordance with the party's approach to fundamental issues of religious toleration in the country -- the training of priests and nuns, religious education for children, etc. Prague's response to the sense and spirit of the Vatican accord will be the proving ground of its Church policy.

(20) RFE Special/News, 20 November 1972.

In this connection Mgr. Casaroli noted upon his return from Prague that the appointment of bishops in such a politically compromising political setting was possible, from the Church's point of view, only if they were guaranteed the right to exercise their functions without being subject to influence by the state. Commenting on the oath of loyalty to the state which the newly appointed bishops took, (21) he argued that such action was not necessarily indicative of a proregime attitude. Such an oath was customary in all East European states, and when the bishops had taken it they had expressly stated that their loyalty to the state ended at the point where it became incompatible with their consciences as bishops. (22)

In reporting on a meeting between Mgr. Vrana and Czech Premier Josef Kocourek after the consecration, official media struck a somewhat discordant note. Radio Vozdva (23) described Vrana as "the president of the central committee of the organization of Catholic priests, Peace in Terris," and recorded him as having termed it "a great honor" to be able to continue his work in that organization and to "create the preconditions for the favorable development of relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the state." On the surface this would appear to contradict the Vatican's claim that Vrana had resigned from all active participation in the organization's work, and therefore hardly represents an auspicious beginning to a new chapter in the relations between Prague and the Holy See. After the Radio Vozdva broadcast, however, the Vatican reiterated its claim. Vatican sources called it an "incontrovertible fact" that Mgr. Vrana had gone before the national committee of Peace in Terris to resign his presidency and to serve notice that in future he would take no active part in the movement. (24) A possible explanation of the contradictory Czechoslovak references to Vrana's status, according to the Vatican, was the desire to minimize his break with Peace in Terris.

Ernie Hajek
Robert W. Dean

(21) Radio Prague Domestic, 6 March 1973.

(22) RFE Special/Vienna, 8 March 1973.

(23) 6 March 1973.

(24) RFE Special/Rome, 10 March 1973.