

SERVANT LEADERS

International Leadership Institute: Providing Leadership Development Services and Programs in the US and Europe since 1985

Volume 4, Issue 7

July 2008

Evangelizing the Czechs

by Sara Tusek



Christian culture in today's territory of the Czech Republic first emerged in the 5th century, thanks to the Irish St. Patrick and his missions to Central Europe.

The Kingdom of Bohemia (which preceded the Czech Republic) was again evangelized in the 9th century by Cyril and Methodius, who were sent from Constantinople by Patriarch Photos.

From Three Things You Can't Do in Prague

It seems presumptuous for me (as a U.S. citizen) to speak of evangelizing people in the Czech Republic, since Christian missionaries were establishing vigorous Christian churches in that region of Central Europe when the present-day United States was a vast area thinly populated by Native American tribes with a variety of religions, none of them Christian.

Those missionaries include the famously-successful Saints Cyril and Methodius of Macedonia, who traveled to Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic) in the 9th century and established an Orthodox church tradition, including a written language and liturgy, that still exists, 12 centuries later (please note the box to the left).

So who am I to come along with much weaker credentials, presuming to bring the Gospel to the Czechs? Or, to put it more gently, what do I have to bring that may win people for Christ in postmodern, post-totalitarian, prosperous and progressive Czech society?

CHRISTIAN ROOTS

It might be helpful to briefly review the history of the Christian church in what is now the Czech Republic (the former kingdoms of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia) to gain some

ideas on how to approach modern Czechs in the name of Christ.

As the box to the left indicates, Christianity first spread in Central Europe through the work of St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. His pioneering work was institutionalized by Cyril and Methodius, whose Slavonic liturgy was the "gold standard" for Czech Christian worship for the next five centuries.

Thirteenth-century Holy Roman Emperor and Bohemian king Charles IV cherished the Slavonic tradition, as did the Protestant reforming Hussite movement, which developed during the rule of Charles' son, Wenceslas IV. The Hussites maintained a distinctive



Osek Monastery, founded 1196, Czech Republic; photo courtesy Luis Blanco

Bohemian Christian presence until 1620's "Battle of White Mountain," in which the victorious Hapsburg armies changed not just the political but also the religious institutions of what is now the Czech Republic.

CHURCH AND POLITICS



The Hapsburg empire was emphatically Roman Catholic, and required that its subjects be the same. I believe that this intrusion of politics into the spiritual life of the Czech people was a terrible blow to Czech Christianity, a blow from which it has not yet recovered.

This is not to say that the Roman Catholic church is in any way wrong or evil. As an institution, it has an impressive history—in fact, at one time all European Christians were Roman Catholic, thanks to the Emperor Constantine. But I firmly believe that there should be no incursion of the political governance into the spiritual lives of its citizens.

When political power is tied to membership in a particular religion, the legitimacy of all religion is compromised. Religion is not about gaining or wielding power—it is about understanding and correctly acting according to one's relationship to oneself, one's neighbor and to God Himself.

Politics and religion cannot be mixed without hurting both. This statement can be supported by history (theocracy always ends in intolerance and injustice), the Bible ("render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" is Christ's response to the political vs. religious question posed to Him), and common sense: if one's religious beliefs are so personal that they are protected by law, as they are in most democracies, then it follows that any coercion by the government as to one's religious beliefs is against the best interest of that government.

I am convinced that attempts by religious groups to apply their collective influence on civil government are misguided attempts, doomed to failure. No representative government (such as the Czech Republic) can afford to be bul-

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lied by any pressure group, however well-meaning, if it wishes to maintain its legitimacy as representing all its citizens.

"DO NO HARM"

The Hippocratic oath taken by physicians is simple: "first, do no harm." As I try to evangelize the Czechs, I will remember the harm done by past power-hungry regimes that forced "religion" down the throats of their people, leaving a very bad taste in the mouth.

Any use of force in the name of religion is evil, in my eyes. Christ gives the example of bearing unjust accusations and even execution at the hands of human beings, when He could have used His power as God to end His suffering at any moment. He chose not to use force, so how can I, His follower, act differently?

To bring the Gospel to those who (with good cause) scorn the Christian Church will call for infinite patience, hope and love. Changing the hearts and minds of those who've seen the Church being abused (used as a weapon to maintain political authority) will not be as easy perhaps, as bringing the Gospel to people who've never heard of Christ and have no negative preconceptions.

I know I don't have the necessary patience, hope and love to overcome centuries of ridicule and disrespect shown to a Church that was dragged through the mud of hypocrisy and political ambition. I can't reach back into history and rewrite the story of Christianity in the Czech Republic.

But I can tell about my own love for Christ, how He saved me from my sin and continues to save me daily. I can be a witness to the love of God for the people He creates, and I can write about His ability to give humans a life of purpose and meaning beyond what we can see in front of us. In this way, I can presume to spread the Gospel, that story of unmerited love and mercy by God given to everyone who wants to have it, to the people who live in the Czech Republic.

Cesta Tam=There is a way

Our vision is to help raise a generation of fervent, evangelical, missionary-minded Czechs to restore the Czech Church to its mission and calling in the world.

Servant Leaders
Sara Tusek, Editor
830-13 A1A North, #317
Ponte Vedra Beach FL 32082
Tel/Fax: 904.992.8729;
tusek@fdn.com; www.ili.cc