

Extended use in the Roman Catholic churches of the Czech Republic, experiences and reflections

The main topic of this conference is mixed use of the churches which lost their basic function in our society. I was discussing the problem with several responsible people including leading persons of our diocese, also with church historians, and I realised several things.

First is that this question is nothing new in our complicated history.

Just to mention basic points of history, the first Slavic state in the region was Great Moravia in 9th century, followed by the Kingdom of Bohemia which lasted as an independent kingdom till 16th century. From 1526 the country was ruled by the Habsburg dynasty and, until the end of the First World War in 1918, was part of the Austrian Empire.

Christianity was introduced both from German and Byzantine areas in 9th century. Initially the region was subordinated to the bishop of Regensburg until the independent Bishopric of Prague was established in 972.

The most important development of the Church organisation came in 14th century during the rule of Charles IV., the King of Bohemia and the Emperor of the medieval Roman Empire.

The first dramatic change of the church property and use of the churches was the Hussite movement and the Reformation in 15th and 16th centuries causing the division of the Church and the whole society like in other European countries. Many churches changed the denomination, some were destroyed or demolished - especially monastery churches which were in many cases burned down by the Hussite armies. In the long following period some monasteries were empty, in some cases with alternative use as a storage space or accommodation for poor and homeless people.

Another period of decay was the Thirty Years War 1619-1648. It is estimated that the population was reduced due to the war and following epidemics to half the level of the beginning of 17th century. Again empty churches, empty villages....

The post war era was the time of catholicization, not happy times for Czech protestants and for the freedom of confession. On the other hand, it was a period of development of baroque architecture and the whole style of life, most of our villages still have the appearance of 17th a 18th century. Many old Romanesque or gothic churches were either rebuilt or built new in baroque style, both in towns and villages.

The end of 18th century during the short reign of Austrian Emperor Joseph II., there was again the time of change. Many reforms of the whole society were introduced, some positive, as abolition of bondage, others quite problematic. Such a problematic decision was abolition of most of contemplative monasteries and religious orders. Those monasteries were often centres of knowledge and education, with great libraries, schools and centres of education. The idea was to confiscate the property to the state fund and to use the sources for the reform of parish structure and building new parish houses serving not only for the Church but also as the state administrative centres. The emperor wanted to have the whole society under control. Religious activities of contemplative orders were out of this structure.

Another type of religious places and activities unwelcome to the Emperor were pilgrimage centres of our country. In 18th century the pilgrimage to the places of some miracles, healing or revelation were very popular demonstrations of public devotion. Joseph II. declared prohibition of pilgrimages and decided to demolish some of the pilgrimage churches. Some of

them were unique examples of baroque architecture and local people were doing their best to save it. Such example was this beautiful church of St. John of Nepomuk in central Moravia, recently proclaimed UNESCO monument of world heritage. Mayors of the surrounding villages succeeded in converting the area to the public cemetery. Cemetery church was acceptable in the scheme of the reforms, so the church survived.

Many churches from this period were converted to some industrial or even housing purposes, some of them still creating emotions of conservationists and historians.

The end of the First World War was also the date of independence, joining Czechs, Slovaks and several other minorities into one state called Czechoslovakia. As the Roman Catholic Church was quite friendly with the finishing Austrian Empire, there was a strong movement of opposition against the structure of the Church. The result was a creation of the new Czechoslovak Hussite Church, called after the 15th century reformer Jan Hus. Many former Roman Catholics became members of this new Church, some parishes and its churches were converted for the new confession as a whole, but many people left the Church for good and all.

The short period of democracy was finished in the tragedy of the World War II. and all the following events. First was the transfer of 3 million Sudet Germans from the border areas of Czechoslovakia in 1945. Within a few months hundreds of villages, towns and its churches became empty, slowly and only partially inhabited by the people from other parts of the country, without any historical attachment to the area.

Only 3 years after the war our democracy finished in the communist coup. The Roman Catholic church became the state enemy no.1, many priests arrested, many churches demolished for several official reasons. One popular way how to do it was to proclaim whole regions as a military area. This method was very successful especially along the West German and Austrian border but also some inland areas became military training places. Existing churches and whole villages were very popular targets for the tanks and canons of the communist army.

The most absurd and controversial story happened in the seventies in Northern Bohemia. Many villages were demolished there because of expanding brown coal mines. Finally coal was detected also in the area of medieval town Most. The decision was to demolish the whole town and to move the people to new concrete panel houses few kilometres away. One of several town churches was extremely valuable late gothic architecture, and the decision was to move the church. The whole thing became reality, the whole medieval town disappeared and the church was moved nearly one kilometre on special rails and wheels made in Skoda factory to the edge of the mines.

Now we live more than 20 years in democracy again. There will be 23rd anniversary of our Velvet revolution on Saturday. This period was a time of reconstruction of the whole country. We are not finished yet. There are deep wounds in our society and especially in minds of our people. It is important to say that it was also the time of peaceful division of two nations. Since 1993 Czechoslovakia doesn't exist any more, split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Concerning the Church, let me introduce some figures. Now I will talk only about the Czech Republic again. We were very optimistic after the first democratic census in 1991, when about 50 % of the 10 million inhabitants of the country proclaimed themselves as members of

some church, about 90% of them Roman Catholics. The Church still had very high credit from the totality, when many priests were arrested, some killed, most of the Church property confiscated, lot of it destroyed but despite this reality many Christians staying strong in their faith, defending freedom of expression and basic human rights.

Something happened during the next 10 years; in 2001 the number was reduced to 25%. Similar reduction was indicated in the last census in 2011, when only 14% marked their Christian faith or Church belonging, about 36% proclaiming themselves as atheists and 47% avoiding to comment on the religion at all.

The reality of figures of active Christians is even less optimistic, only about 7% of the population attending regularly Sunday services, in western part of the country only 2%. The Churches, and especially the Roman Catholic one, is quite unpopular in the general public opinion. Journalists like to write especially about the claim of property restitution, for several times opened and several times rejected in our parliament.

And what about the churches? There are about 7500 Roman catholic churches and 1000 churches of other denominations in our country. Up to 1000 of them are of very low use or with no use at all.

However we are not prepared yet to manage any general system how to organize the care or alternative use of those churches.

One of the reasons is the fact of unsettled status of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the other Churches in the society. As I mentioned, the state was not willing yet to refund most of the property of the Churches stolen by the communist regime. The rough estimate of the amount of this property is 134 billion CZK, which is about 5,36 billion EUR. On the other hand priests and pastors are paid from the state budget like the state administration. The idea of the new law which is now the subject of heavy political fight between left wing and right wing parties in the parliament is to give back about 55% of the original property and to pay for the rest which can't be restituted during the next 20 years. During the same period the state would be continuously reducing the amount of money for the priests' salaries. After 20 years the Churches would be completely independent, financing themselves only from their own sources. Left wing parties and some other MP's were trying hard to block passing the bill saying that state can't afford to do that in the times of economic decrease, blaming especially the Roman Catholic church to claim too much property from poor state. Last week the bill finally passed through the parliament, now it is in the hands of president, and maybe some other attempts of the social democrats and communists would continue to destroy the agreement.

Another reason why we are not prepared for any systematic solutions is that there are still good possibilities to get the support for the church repairs from different grants and supporting programs on local, national and EU level as I mentioned at the beginning. As a paradox we succeed quite often to get money for some interesting church which is empty and almost without use, and in the same time we fight for basic funding on the place of existing parish community.

There is great difference in approach of parish priests and even among the dioceses how to work with those churches. There are some priests being responsible for 10 or even 15 churches. Some of them trying to keep the services in most of their churches once a week, once a month or several times of the year, trying to keep even very small communities of few

people joined around each church. Others are inviting people to the central places of the parish to join the people together, saying that they don't need the empty churches at all.

Some say that the church was built as a house of God and it should stay the house of God for ever, or at least till the end of its existence. Others feel there is a new opportunity to invite people to the church not only for the Mass but also for other cultural reasons.

In our world of lost Christian faith many people like to come to the church just to see beautiful historical building or to sit down and listen to the sounds of silence or to their own heart. They don't need perfectly restored churches. However, they need open churches. On the contrary, most of our churches are closed and well locked, often with security alarm system. Why? Too many churches were visited by robbers especially in the first years after the revolution. About 10 000 valuable pieces of art were stolen from the churches, most of them never found, probably sold out of the country. We lack local people to take care of the building, to open it, to stay during the day and to present the church to the visitors.

I would like to mention a special new event called Night of the churches. As far as I know the initiative has its origin in Germany in 2001, followed by Austria and Holland in 2005 the Czech Republic since 2009 and Slovakia since 2011. Every year more and more churches and parishes are opening their churches in one particular night of June to present the church, to organize various cultural programmes or just to keep the church open at least till midnight. In June 2012 about 400 000 people visited our churches during this special night. Each region has its brochure of involved churches and the list of all programmes going on.

Another interesting point is cooperation with municipalities. A church is very often the only one listed building of the village or of the town area. Some local politicians are very much fond of their church as a witness of history of the place, willing to support the repairs or activities or even to take charge of the building in cases where the parish community doesn't exist any more. About 150 churches within the whole country has been offered to the local municipalities, some for ownership, some for long term rent within the last 15 years.

We have also very interesting examples of saving the redundant churches by the activity of local enthusiastic people joined in NGO's, I was able to register about 30 examples within the whole country, so nothing really massive yet.

Nearly in all cases concerning municipalities and NGO's churches are used for cultural purposes like concert halls, exhibition places of art or history of the area. An important aspect usually required by the local parish in the contract of cooperation is to allow a celebration of the Mass when needed, at least once a year.