
**The Problems of the Person, the Life
and the Work of Jan Hus:
The Significance and the Task of a Commission
of the Czech Bishops' Conference**

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During his first visit to the Czech Republic in a speech at the Prague Castle on 21 April 1990, Pope John Paul II invited the church and our entire public to adopt a new view of the problem of Hus, saying:

The yearning for Christian unity *is one of the great signs of our times*. The commitment is growing in all believers towards overcoming the opposition which constitutes a scandal before the world, as well as being in contrast with Christ's clear will, and which damages our common mission to proclaim the Gospel to all creatures (see Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 1).

That invitation to unity, however, *takes on a special importance here in Bohemia*. Here, where the memory is still vivid of events which had their origin prior to the sad schism of Western Christianity and which have since caused such a long trail of suffering; ... precisely here it seems legitimate to foster the hope that important steps in the direction of fraternal reconciliation and authentic unity in Christ will soon be made. The grave trials and wounds of the past decades and also the memory of the wounds of centuries past, even though they are of a different stamp and of different degree, must help establish a new attitude and new relationships. The visit of the Pope is also an expression of the desire to help undertake a journey of fraternal cooperation with mutual commitment and respect.

I recall that at the Second Vatican Council the Czech Archbishop, Cardinal Josef Beran, made a forceful statement in defense of the principles of religious freedom and tolerance, referring with heartbreaking words to the case of the Bohemian priest Jan Hus and deploring the excesses to which people

abandoned themselves both then and later (see *Acta synodalia*, 4, 393–394). I still recall those words of the Cardinal Archbishop of Prague regarding this priest, who has had so much importance in the religious and cultural history of the Bohemian people. It will be the task of experts – in first place Czech theologians – to define more precisely the place which Jan Hus occupies among the reformers of the Church, beside other famous reforming figures of the Bohemian Middle Ages, such as Tomáš of Štítné and Jan Milíč of Kroměříž. Nevertheless, over and above the theological concerns which he championed, Hus cannot be denied personal integrity of life and a commitment to the instruction and moral elevation of the Nation.

Are not elements which rather than divide believers in Christ, ought to unite them?¹

The task of answering this noble exhortation was entrusted to “The Commission for the Study of the Problems, Connected with the Person, the Life and the Work of Master Jan Hus”, attached to the Czech Bishops’ Conference (CzBC), and established under the chairmanship of Cardinal Miloslav Vlk on 11 June 1993. Since the end of 1996, the deputy chairman of the Commission has been Mons. František Radkovský, the Bishop of Plzeň and the chairman of the Ecumenical Commission of CzBC. The Commission’s membership of twenty-six specialists has a fully ecumenical character. In addition to the representatives of the evangelical churches, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church and the relevant theological faculties, it includes specialists from the Historical and the Philosophical institutes of the Czech Academy of Sciences, and from the Central State Archives.

The chairman of the Papal Council on the Unity of Christians, Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, amplified the Pope’s suggestions in his message to the First International Interconfessional Symposium on Jan Hus, which was held in Bayreuth on 22–16 September 1993:

The discussion of the life and times of Jan Hus will be unable to avoid questions which were disputable in the past and which challenge us even today. That should not be a worry in our case, if we try to find the truth: it is truth that will free us (John 8:32). I also believe that a joint searching for truth and responses to today’s bidding of the Holy Spirit will assist us in a reconciliation of Christians, which has become today a pressing task of all

1) *L’Osservatore Romano* [Weekly English Edition] 17:1127 (23 April 1990) 4–5.

churches and Christian communities in Europe and in the entire world.²

It is, therefore, an explicit task of the Commission, as promised by John Paul II during the meeting with the President of the Republic on 7 March 1994, “to produce a just evaluation of Master Jan Hus on behalf of the Catholic Church by the end of this century”. In this sense the inspiration of this task ties in to a degree with the stimulus of Hubert Jedin, the well-known Catholic historian and the recognized expert on the Council of Trent, who issued a call in the German world as early as 1967 that in Luther’s case it was not only necessary that he receive full justice from the Catholic side, but that we should be able to receive and to embrace him with love which is a distinguishing mark of Christ’s disciples.³ How fruitful the scholarly and interconfessional dialogue of the past twenty-five years has been, is shown by the current results of its fourth phase, which aims at finding the paths of a visible unity of churches.⁴

This fundamental change of the perspectives of perception has its roots already in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly in its decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, of 21 November 1964,⁵ and in its declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*, of 7 December 1965.⁶ The post-conciliar development brought about, beginning in 1967, an entire series of partial dialogues, conducted by the Papal Council on the Unity of Christians with the individual churches.⁷ An important milestone was

2) The text of the speech is in *Jan Hus mezi epochami, národy a konfesemi: Sborník z mezinárodního sympozia konaného 22.–26. září 1993 v Bayreuthu*, SNR, ed. Jan B. Lášek (Prague, 1995) 21–24.

3) Hubert Jedin declared: “Was wir ... können und müssen, das ist: ihm nicht nur volle Gerechtigkeit widerfahren lassen, sondern ihn auch mit der Liebe umfassen, die das Kennzeichen der Jünger des Herrn ist,” see in Heinz Schütte, *Ziel: Kirchengemeinschaft. Zur ökumenischen Orientierung* (Leipzig, 1985) 35.

4) The dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation began in 1971. In 1995 a “Joint Declaration” was submitted to both churches for an official consideration. The year 1996 was devoted to adjustments in the document in response to the points raised by the Congregation for the Teaching of Faith, and of the commissions of the Lutheran churches (representing 122 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation). The process of the examination and adoption of the document is to be completed by the summer of 1998; see the report of H.-A. Raem in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 137:22 (27–28 January 1997) 4.

5) For an English translation see *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott SJ ed., (New York, 1966) 341–366.

6) *Ibid.*, 675–696.

7) For a survey (until 1993) see L. Górka and S. C. Napiorkowski, *Kościół czy kościół: Wybrane zagadnienia z ekumenizmu* (Warsaw: Verbinum, 1995), 166–172. [The best work in

1983, the year of celebrating the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth, when John Paul II established in his letter to Cardinal Willebrands the clear criterion of theological and historical work, which is to become one of the instruments in the reconciliation of the historical memory of the churches:

In the first place it is necessary to continue an accurate historical work. By means of an accurate work without preconceived ideas, motivated solely a search for the truth, one must arrive at a true image of the reformer, of the whole period of the Reformation, and the persons involved in it. Faut, where it exists, must be recognized, wherever it may lie. ... we must not allow ourselves to be guided by the intention of setting ourselves up as judges of history, but solely by the motive of understanding better what happened and of becoming messengers of truth. Only by placing ourselves unreservedly in an attitude of purification by means of the truth can we find a shared interpretation of the past and at the same time reach a new point of departure for the dialogue of today.⁸

Herein are comprised the three basic lines of the task, the lines which become its program: it is necessary (1) to seek truth itself and to become its messengers; (2) to adopt the position of cleansing; and (3) to achieve in a common interpretation a starting point for the present-day dialogue.

The idea of seeking truth itself, in which it is possible to find a meeting ground, was already expressed in the conciliar declaration on religious liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*:

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue. In the course of these, men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for the truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it.⁹

Similarly the conciliar decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, clearly declared that exactly "through such dialogue, everyone gains a truer

English on this subject is Michael Fahey, *Ecumenism: A Bibliographical Overview* (Westport CN and London, 1992); c. 5 lists all the bilateral dialogues. *Ed.*]

8) "Am 10. November", Letter to Cardinal Willebrands on the 500th. anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. *L'Osservatore Romano* [Weekly English Edition] 46:809 (14 November 1983) 9.

9) *The Documents of Vatican II, Dignitatis humanae* 3, 680–81.

knowledge and more just appreciation of the teaching and religious life of both Communions".¹⁰ John Paul II elevated as a distinction the ecumenical dialogue so conceived to the status of "a dialogue as an examination of conscience". Such a dialogue is viewed as one of the Church's priorities, for "in the council's thinking, ecumenical dialogue is marked by a common quest for the truth, particularly concerning the Church", because "In effect, truth forms consciences and directs efforts to promote unity".¹¹

How demanding and extensive this examination of conscience should be, the Pope adumbrated in his forward glance at the threshold of the third millennium in his Apostolic Letter, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, of November 10, 1994, in which he states concerning the preparatory phase of the jubilee:

Hence it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling a;; those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*.

The Holy Door of the Jubilee of the Year 2000 should be symbolically wider than those of previous Jubilees, because humanity, upon reaching this goal, will leave behind not just a century but a millennium. It is fitting that the Church should make this passage with a clear awareness of what has happened to her during the last ten centuries. She cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves, through repentance, of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency, and slowness to act. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today's temptations ad challenges and prepares us to meet them.¹²

The Pope's special concern is not only about the sins, which harmed Christian unity,¹³ but also about the problem of coercion:

10) *Ibid.*, *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4, 347.

11) *Encyclical letter "Ut unum sint" of the Holy Father John Paul II on Commitment to Ecumenism*, 33 (Ottawa, 1995) 39.

12) *Apostolic Letter "Tertio millennio adveniente" of his Holiness Pope John Paul II ... on Preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000*, 33 (Ottawa, 1994) 42–43.

13) *Ibid.*, no. 34, 35.

Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to *intolerance and even the use of violence* in the service of truth.

It is true that an accurate historical judgement cannot prescind from careful study of the cultural conditioning of the times, as a result of which many people may have held in good faith that an authentic witness to the truth could include suppressing the opinions of others or at least paying no attention to them. Many factors frequently converged to create assumptions which justified intolerance and fostered an emotional climate from which only great spirits, truly free and filled with God, were in some way able to break free. Yet the consideration of mitigating factors does not exonerate the Church from the obligation to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and of humble meekness. From these painful moments of the past a lesson can be drawn for the future, leading all Christians to adhere fully to the sublime principle stated by the Council: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with both gentleness and power." (Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1.)¹⁴

John Paul II expressed the thought that a common interpretation was necessary already in Switzerland in 1984 during a visit which coincided with the celebration of the anniversaries of Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin. At that time the Pope met with the representatives of the Union of Swiss Evangelical Churches. In a speech about the two reformers he declared that we diverge in judging the specific events of the Reformation period, but that these events, together with the differences in the central questions of the faith, should not divide us permanently, and he appealed to the sincerity of our efforts to heal the past. "The cleansing of our memories," he then stated, "is the basic factor of our ecumenical progress. It indicates a sincere

14) *Ibid.*, n.35, 45f. See also the remarkable spiritual guide through this process by Kateřina Lachmanová, *Vězení s klíčem uvnitř* (Kostelní Vydří, 1996). In a European-wide dimension this line is explored in a document of the Council of the European Bishops' Conferences and the Conference of European Churches, titled *Druhé evropské ekumenické shromáždění. Smíření: Dar Boží a ramec nového života* (Prague, 1996). The Document is intended for a meeting in Graz in June 1997.

acknowledgement of mutual injuries and errors, which occurred in consequence of mutual controversies at the times, when each side was concerned that the Church would remain faithful to the will of the Lord.” Then he also expressed the hope that “a day will soon come when the Swiss Catholics will be able to describe the history of that disturbed and complex period with an objectivity, resting in a deep brotherly love”, and he proposed that, in case we were able to achieve this goal, we should leave the past entirely to divine mercy, and thus we should attain in the future a full liberation in one body and one mind.¹⁵

The Pope again emphasized the urgency of this task in replying to Dr. Klaus Engelhardt in Paderborn on 22 June 1996:

The unity we strive for must grow gradually. We must develop courage and imagination to take whatever steps are possible today, with firm trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us and prepares us for whatever step will be possible tomorrow. I am aware that many people are suffering because of the division. Therefore it is our duty to tear down the barriers and to strive for a greater measure of communion, in the firm hope that the Lord is leading us to “that blessed day when full unity in faith will be attained and we can celebrate together in peace at the Holy Eucharist of the Lord” (*Ut Unum sint*, n.77).

Behind our longing for unity is the will of Christ and his prayer in the Upper Room. From him also comes our central duty to utilize fully all the opportunities for common activity in theological research and study, interconfessional actions and positions *vis-à-vis* society, and in fraternal conversation as well as in common prayer. Therefore I ask you not to give up, and to continue the dialogue of understanding. Ecumenism with a promising future can come about only if we selflessly seek the truth and patiently listen to one another and bear one another’s burdens.¹⁶

From all that was said so far, it is evident how demanding intellectually and morally is the task of The Commission for the Study of the Problems, Connected with the Person, the Life and the Work of Master Jan Hus, attached to the Czech Bishops’ Conference. It is partly because of the whole series of tendentious uses made of Hus’s person in literature,¹⁷ partly

15) Holeček, “K perspektívám proměny katolického náhledu”, 25.

16) *L’Osservatore Romano*, [Weekly English Edition] 27:1448 (3 July 1996) 4.

17) Let us consider two of the most colourful. Even Benito Mussolini used Hus for attacking the Catholic Church during his socialist period when he wrote *Giovanni Hus: Il*

because of the painful memories of churches relevant to the period under investigation.¹⁸ An opinion survey of a sizable sample of the population (about 1,000 persons) showed the Commission clearly that there was little public awareness of the earlier Hus scholarship, such as the studies of the Catholic author Jan Sedlák,¹⁹ or the monumental work of Václav Novotný and Vlastimil Kybal.²⁰ Another problem is the failures to complete a comprehensive edition of Hus's works. This includes *Mistra Jana Husi sebrané spisy české* by Karel J. Erben (3 vv., 1865–1868), the energetic thrust of Milan Svoboda and Václav Flajšhans, *Mistra Jana Husi Sebrané spisy*, launched in 1904, dissipated its elan after six volumes, and last but not least the monumentally conceived critical edition by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, *Magisteri Iohannis Hus Opera omnia*, begun in 1975, now languishes for want of editors.

The Commission is also confronted with the calls for a full appraisal of Hus's contribution, beginning with the isolated voice of Royko in 1785,²¹ through the brilliant intuitions of Kybal and De Vooght's work of the 1960s, *L'Hérésie de Jean Hus*,²² to the exquisite findings of Amadeo Molnár²³ and

Veridico, [Collezione storica de I Martiri del libero pensiero 8] published in 1913. [The book was published in two English translations *John Huss* (New York, 1929) and *John Huss the Veracious* (New York, 1939). The latter contains a six page Publisher's Foreword in which we are told that "Mussolini's luminous genius is shown best in his writings". (8) ed.]

An established historian and philosopher, Miloslav Ransdorf, who is also the deputy chairman of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, appealed to the ineradicable spirit of the "nation of heretics" in assailing the cabinet of Premier Václav Klaus in his work, *Mistr Jan Hus*, published in the series "Svět českého myšlení" (Prague, 1993).

In addition, the sizable book of Eva Kantůrková, *Jan Hus* (Prague, 1991) 467 pp. was characterized by the expert editor of Hus's works, Dr. Anežka Vidmanová, as reflecting a spirit reminiscent of the nineteenth century.

18) The most recent Catholic literature, for instance, includes the eminently scholarly work of Jaroslav Kadlec, *Katoličtí exulanti doby husitské* (Prague, 1990).

19) Especially his *Jan Hus* (Prague, 1915). For the use of the Commission, Sedlák's scattered articles and studies were recently published as a collection by J. V. Polc, entitled *Miscellanea husitica* (Prague, 1996).

20) Václav Novotný and Vlastimil Kybal, *M. Jan Hus: Život a učení*, 2 vv. in 5 parts (Prague, 1919–1931).

21) K. Royko, *Hystorye velikého Sněmu kostnického*. Vol. 2: *Příběhy Husa* (Prague, 1785).

22) For a reaction see the notable pamphlet of Milan Machovec, *Bude katolická církev rehabilitovat Jana Husa?* (Prague, 1965). A Czech translation of De Vooght is beginning to appear in *Theologická revue: Dvoutměsíčník Husitské teologické fakulty Univerzity Karlovy v Praze*, see 1 (1997) 1–5.

23) Amadeo Molnár, "Husovo místo v evropské reformaci", in his *Pohyb teologického myšlení: Přehledné dějiny dogmatu* (Prague, 1982) 193–209.

František Šmahel,²⁴ to say nothing about the distinct shift of Hus's assessment in the foreign literature, translated into Czech.²⁵

Beginning its concrete functioning, the Commission noted that it was necessary, above all, to formulate a specific structure for the dialogue, and to foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding among the churches. For that purpose its members listened to several hundred lectures in individual sections, thus gaining familiarity with the relevant magisterial and papal documents. Expert findings by themselves would not fall on fertile ground, if a common effort had not contributed to the genesis of the mentality and the culture of a dialogue. This has been a task of considerable difficulty, inasmuch as such preconditions had not existed in the Bohemian and Moravian milieus. From the purely scholarly point of view, the Commission has embarked on an intensive study of the issues of the trial in Constance, and it is preparing the first paper on the condemned articles, concerning Hus's concept of predestination in its relationship to the understanding of the church. During the past three years the Commission successfully established contacts with foreign specialists, and presented the results of its research at symposia abroad (Bayreuth in 1993, Lublin in 1996). The first intimations of the more penetrating insights into Hus's theological teachings evoke an encouraging expectation that the traditional misunderstandings might be transcended, while both sides preserve a critical approach and the obligatory respect for truth.

(Translated from the Czech by Zdeněk V. David)

24) See especially the magisterial collection of his lectures, František Šmahel, *La révolution hussite, une anomalie historique* (Paris, 1985).

25) See, for instance, Wilhelm Baum, *Císař Zikmund. Kostnice, Hus a válka proti Turkům* (Prague, 1996) a translation of his *Kaiser Sigismund: Hus, Konstanz und Türkenkriege* (Graz, 1993).