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Pax
july 20, 1964

Dear Tom:

We have been back a week--and I am conscious that four weeks ago at this moment we ~~x~~ were on the brink of France, having been in the air six hours, watching the sun rise, seeing the vast areas of farmland, the neat fields, the red tile roofs which were a fine beginning for anything.

There is obviously too much to write about, and I am more or less going to beg off. Both Jean and I are making, together, an attempt to write about the trip on an installment plan in the Catholic Worker--she will write two articles, one on Paris and Rome, and me the other two, Prague and London. I hope to send you some photos before long, too, as it would be pleasant to share with you some of the more interesting things--and people--which and whom we managed to record on film.

I was very happy to see your little statement on the back ~~of~~ of the Henri Perrin book (which McDonnell of the the Pilot just sent Jean to review). The arrival of the book came at the most appropriate conceivable moment, immediately ~~x~~ upon our return, while we are still practically vibrating from our conversations with two priest-workers from a large Church on the south of Paris. The one who spoke English the best--a large, broad shouldered man with a handsome worker's face and strong broad hands--worked packing newspapers and delivering them, a 4 or 5 hour a day job. His great hope is that he will be able--if the Holy Office restrictions can be abolished and authority returned to the bishops--to work full time in a regular factory of some sort. I cannot tell you how deeply impressed we were with these men, with their solidness, and not least of all their patience and faith and complete lack of pretension, their basic pervasive humanity. Jean will try to write about them in a more enlightening way. Our contact with them was one of the significant moments of the journey.

The stay in Prague is also something I want to attempt in some way to share with you. It began so bleakly, yet delivered itself over and over again. We arrived, tired from traveling, having had little sleep and not a chance to unpack more than our toothbrushes in either Paris or Rome (and our even briefer stay in Zurich). Even the sun seemed grey. The airport is a depressing one, drab, uncomfortable, sterile. It was blistering hot and the bus ride into the city and then to our hotel (a large, Red Square thing called the Internationale, despised by the Czechs as a result of forced-labor and a reminder of Stalinist days) was unpleasant.

Yet each day proved quietly and in small ways how wrong our dour judgement had been. It had to be discovered slowly, because--and this is hard for an American--it is a city of almost hidden virtues, almost self-effacing in its humility.

I ~~x~~ remember especially the relaxed friendliness of almost everyone and the lack generally of rigidity in social contacts: there was a woman walking down the street, very naturally, but with a foamy mug of beer in one hand--odd by the cities standards (we saw only her do it) and yet not even the slightest reaction. And too I began noting a simple but clever little vase which many had on the dashboards of their cars, in which a small bouquet--three or four flowers--would be kept. Flowers everywhere, not the perfect, heaven-sent sort of masterpieces which we saw in florists' shops in Zurich, but rougher, weedier things, sometimes a little bruised, a bit more peasant in tone. We found that even the poorest persons would not purchase a handfull of flowers before calling on someone, and flowers were not free, but really a ~~xi~~ luxury.

There is little apparent life in either the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church of Czechoslovakia. Religious services are ~~ava~~ invariably attended, even on special days, by older ~~and~~ people, and few. In both cases, for one thing, the liturgy seems very distant and, in the case of the Orthodox, it is not only distant in many ways, but so terribly long--two hours is nothing, three is not unusual. I talked with Catholics from Poland, and despite the many and serious problems there, apparently among younger Catholics and priests there is a great renewal in process. In Czechoslovakia among the Protestants the story is completely different. On the evening of July 5th, the day before John Huss, Bohemian founder of the Czech national church was burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church as a heretic, we attended a service in an ancient 12th century church, some of its windows broken by stones ~~x~~ hurdeled from the outside, white wash peeling, etc., and it was an unforgettable experience of life in Christ. I have never seen so many people crammed into a comparatively small space, every seat filled, standing wherever there was room for two feet, many many young people. It was the second Church service of the day for these people, an evening service. I have never heard such solid, joyful singing in my life; it was as if the church was being held together by song. And, of special interest, though it was the eve of the martyrdom of the church's sub-founder, one of our priests, Charles Johnson, was asked to speak. We were told he was the first Roman Catholic to speak in the church since the Reformation, and not only was he permitted to speak, but he was asked to speak from the pulpit, which in the Czech church is a great honor, and not afforded to any but those considered validly ordained.

There can be no question that one of the main factors of renewal in the protestant church there is its adjustment to socialism, not only adjustment in fact, but its general approval of socialist-marxism, rejecting atheism firmly, but approving ~~xi~~ such an economic order as ~~x~~ condusive to the common good and the betterment of world order. Such an attitude is far reaching--it is a leap which neither the Orthodox or the Catholics have truly made--in fact I am

inclined to think it is the failure to leap from one century to the next. Mass is still mumbled in a way which it must have been in the heart of the dark ages. The Church in the world and of the World in a very bodily way is an alien thought. The thought, expressed by Dan Berrigan, that Christ in the World is ahead of Christ in the Church, is true of the Orthodox and Catholic churches in ^{relation to} Czechoslovakia--and such a thought would send shivers down the spine of any Czech bishop, and no doubt the label heretic.

There is no doubt that the Marxists, ^{in Czechoslovakia} almost without exception, continue to reject any sort of theism. I am convinced they reject Christianity in good faith, believing it too have done far more harm than good to mankind, to be a poison to society which should be resisted. They do, however, provide facilities for religious education in public schools for those who want it, a surprising concession, I thought. There was a Marxist professor who spoke with us, an excellent person, who was ~~xxx~~ obviously a little embarrassed to be addressing Christians, and perhaps particularly Christians from the English speaking world who had come to Prague for an international peace conference. None of it fit at all! It was the first time he had done such a thing, he told us, going on to speak as a man grouping honestly for a meeting ground--attempting to establish those things which in his opinion he thought Christians ought to have in common with Marxists. I was of course reminded of Pope John's admonition: Seek concords instead of differences.

There is so much I could tell you about, obviously, but there is only so much time, time for me to write and time for you to read. So I will do the best I can with the Catholic Worker articles and try to save a little money so I can send you a few photographs.

Perhaps in the next letter I will be able to tell you a little about our most unusual meetings and experiences in London.

With love always in Christ,

Jim

Jim Forest

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P.S. Enclose clippings on the riots going on here in Harlem,
and in Turid day.