THE PARTY OF THE CATHOLIC PEOPLE
IN BOHEMIA 1906–1910:
A Contribution to the History of Czech Political Catholicism

Pavel Marek

At the turn of the 20th century, Czech political Catholicism was struggling to find the best pattern of its organization reflecting the split of opinions within Catholic ranks. Though unanimous in questions of faith, Catholic political elites differed in their concepts and tactics. Not only were they divided into two major political streams – those of Catholic Nationalists and Christian Socialists – but they ceaselessly quarrelled and fragmented into sects, factions and secessionist movements. Czech Catholic leaders resented this fact, all the more so because the Church and its offshoots were threatened by liberals and socialists keen to marginalize Catholicism. The leaders struggled to invigorate Catholics and ally them into a single movement; however, results differed from original intentions.

The idea of establishing an integral political party hovered over Czech Catholics throughout the 1890s. They drew the inspiration from the German Catholic Zentrum Party that integrated diverse streams, groups and factions under the umbrella of a single leadership. Czech Catholics were willing to learn from its past and present. Some even went through study visits to Germany and they all monitored its activities in newspapers. Nevertheless, all attempts at applying this model to Czech circumstances failed and no functional measures or motions were carried. A unified party, though with two parallel and actually independent structures, was established only in Moravia. As for Bohemia, the situation did not become ripe before the middle of the first decade of the 20th century: founded in 1906, the Party of the Catholic People embraced three factions – Catholic-National, Christian-Social, and Christian-Social and People’s.

The author of this paper attempted to depict the history of this so-called ‘Czech Zentrum Party’ that existed only briefly: the pre-WWI Catholic milieu was not ready to accept an existence of such a political entity. The paper is based mostly on sources and materials from the Prague archives of the Christian-Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and on the period press, namely, nationwide Catholic periodicals distributed in Bohemia and Moravia – (Čech, Nový věk, XX. věk, Našinec, Mír, Meč, Venkován, Naše listy, Vlast, Týden). It is, however, quite understandable that a reader will not find
minute references to newspaper articles in the following text since the essay is meant first and foremost for foreign readers. As for historical literature, the only book ever published on this topic is a study by Martin Kučera (2000); other scholars have ignored it. Accordingly, this essay should be regarded as exploratory.

The Party of the Catholic People emerged from ruins of the Catholic political movement subverted by discord and moral devastation resulting from St. Wenceslas Savings Bank scandal. Strife within the Czech Catholic community had lasted for several years and there was only one influential and, at least relatively, mass political organization of the Catholics in the beginning of the 20th century – the Christian-Social People’s Party. Other organizations – or, rather, clubs – had only a handful of members. These circumstances inevitably afflicted the newly established Party, especially in questions of its programme, tactics and governance that caused the inner struggle. Sick of quarrels between Prague leaders, Catholics in the Bohemian countryside had to rely upon themselves. Having established working and utterly independent structures and organizational links, they were less then willing to submit to the new headquarters and party spirit. Local branches, e. g., those in the Diocese of Hradec Králové (Eastern Bohemia), kept acting as a ‘party within the party’. The arduous task of forging three essentially different movements into a single party was made even more difficult by ambitious and undisciplined individuals – often members of Parliament, controversial articles of rampant journalists, selfish interests of various factions etc. In his later recollections, one of the then Catholic leaders described the whole interlude of the Party of the Catholic People as a period of constant warfare. Viewed from this standpoint, ‘the integration of 1906’ was rather dubious.

The process of the integration was actually initiated by countryside Catholics: they had grown impatient with quarrelsome Prague leaders who played into hands of enemies instead of promoting their programme and the cause of Catholicism. Changing the manners of party elites became a sine qua non especially for those social groups and classes that joined the Catholic movement at the turn of the century after the Christian-Social circles tried to transform the movement, then consisting mostly of workers, broaden its foundations and attract all Catholics. Both the Christian-Social Left and Right courted peasants; accordingly, the Association of Czech Catholic Peasants in the Czech Kingdom was founded in 1904, soon becoming the most influential and powerful Catholic organization in the country. Later, the Association

---


3. This organization started to form up in 1902 after the Kolín conference, the first number of its periodical Selský list (edited by František Šafránek, a peasant) being published on 15 September 1902. After the Agrarian Party had refused to cooperate – at least allegedly – following the Prague Congress of Catholic Peasants (1903), the latter founded a separate organization at their congress in Svatá Hora near Příbram in July 1904. Thanks to a vast campaign, it had about 10,000 members within short. Cf.: FIKEJZL, Josef: K vnitrním poměrům. Mír, 2, 1912, No. 10, 7 March, inset, p. 1. JIROUŠEK, Tomáš J.: Dějiny socialismu v zemích Koruny české, 3. Praha (Prague) 1905, p. 120.
became a backbone of the Party of the Catholic People, thus transforming it into a party of the rural population. Understandably enough, the peasants demanded that the Party leadership should represent their interests.

The ‘Founding Fathers’ presented their Party as not a mere like of the German Zentrum Party (i. e., an organization integrating all social classes and therefore ‘unparalleled since times of Palacký and Rieger’) but also as ‘a coalition of all pro-Christian movements of our nation’, i. e., both Catholics and Protestants. Moreover, the most fatal blunder of the Party leaders was the notion that they had successfully eliminated a Christian-Democratic faction. This opinion was expressed in an article published in *Naše listy* soon after the Party had been established. The article was entitled ‘Trifling Remains’ and its author, a former speaker of the Christian-Social Right, compared the career of R. Horský with that of E. Dlouhý-Pokorný; while the former became the head of the Party, the latter – once a leader of Christian Democrats – not only failed as a politician but even abjured his holy orders. The author was right when he claimed that, since 1906, the Party leadership had been in hands of a ‘National Triumvirate’; however, he seemed to miss the fact that its real movers were Dlouhy-Pokorný’s heirs: V. Myslivec, J. Hovádek, V. Koleš, P. Holý, F. Šafránek, J. Adámek, F. Jukl, J. Kuška, M. Záruba et al. These people became aware of new trends within the Christian-Social movement and spoke up for Catholic peasants.

The Catholic political movement had been torn by conflicts between various conservative and democratic factions since the 1890s. Those who expected that after 1906, upon the emergence of a single Catholic Party, the very roots of inner struggles ceased to exist were soon proved wrong. A peasant faction lead by V. Myslivec was no longer satisfied with a role of a mute mainstay of the Party leadership; it wished to share the power and to further its own interest and ambitions.

Some facts suggest that the Association of Catholic Peasants, having conceived a very ambitious programme as early as 1905, later tried to apply it to the policy of the Party of the Catholic People, as well. The programme expanded on positive experience of self-help schemes, thus putting Christian-Social guidelines into practice and linking the ideological and political matters with the material well-being of the Party members. This was an utterly new trend in the Czech Catholic movement that

---

4 *Pod jeden prapor.* Nový věk, 1, 1908, No. 23, 6 March, p. 1. – The question of the episcopate and its influence upon the Party policy was widely discussed when the Party was being founded. R. Horský’s Christian Socials rebuffed the attack of the conservatives, deciding that bishops should not interfere in the management of the Party that is ‘independent on the episcopate in matters of policy’. In 1908, the 2nd congress the Party confirmed these trends. (R. Horský allegedly said that a purely religious party has no right to existence in a constitutional country.) *ČT.: Za pravdu, svobodu a právo.* Nový věk, 1, 1908, No. 34, 22 May, p. 1. – However, numerous quarrels over diocesan branches showed that diocesan committees in fact consulted the bishops in some questions.

5 We can re-enact this programme only in retrospection. It included: building up the Economic Association of Christian Farmers, the Provincial Union of Agricultural Cooperatives and Associations, the Czech-Slavic Savings Bank, the *Věňkován* periodical (1907), the Calendar of *Věňkovana* (1908), purchasing the printing works (first, Veritas, then Českoslovanská akciová tiskárna), founding a daily paper (*XX. věk*), and establishing the Association of Rural Youth of Bohemia (1908) and its journal *Naše mládež*. Archives of the KDU-ČSL Praha (Prague), collection of F. M. Zampach, Ms. by J. Fikejzl: Začátky křesťansko-demokratického hnutí v Čechách, pp. 113–134.
had preferred propaganda and political campaigning instead. The new policy line was closely linked with Emanuel Jungr, a promoter and founder of Party enterprises. Beside these activities he also attempted to uplift the Party organization and propaganda, founding and concentrating youth sections and press.

E. Jungr came over to the Catholic movement in 1905, having been engaged by V. Myslivec as an editor and a secretary of the Catholic peasants’ movement. He definitely raised the level of the movement. In 1907, after the Party succeeded in general elections, Jungr took his offensive so as to provide his peasants with positions in the Party leadership and an influence upon its policy. Admittedly, they had two representatives – Šafránek and Barcal – in the executive committee, but deemed the figure inadequate. Even worse, peasants’ leaders reproached the Party bosses for their attitude toward the peasants, labelling it as obstructive, derogative and devastating – both morally and materially. From their point of view, the executive committee did damage to the Party.

The Party’s left wing (formally led by V. Myslivec who nevertheless seemed to be dominated by Jungr) tried to strengthen the peasants’ position within the Party and even seize the power, but there was more to it. The very political strategy of the Party lay at the root of the struggle between the Right, backed by a ‘priestly faction’ from the Diocese of Hradec Králové, and the Left that broke out as early as before the elections of 1907. The question was whether the Party should act separately or in a coalition. Pointing out that its own candidates had never succeeded, the Right preferred to support candidates nominated by other parties: Agrarians in the country and Young Czechs in towns. (Fearing that Social Democrats would gain profit from the recently introduced universal suffrage, conservatives sided with the ‘civic’, i. e., non-socialist parties.) The Left, on the contrary, demanded that the Party should act on its own accord and nominate candidates for the Austrian Diet (Viennese Parliament) at least in country districts, where Catholics were well set to win. This controversy was held to be pivotal, if not critical, for the future of the Party and it was not easy for Myslivec and his faction to have their way. The fact that seven candidates of the Party of the Catholic People got elected seemed to justify the strategy of the Left, even though Catholic candidates got their seats mostly due to backstage alliances with the Agrarians forged by Party conservatives (namely, the Count Schönborn) immediately before the second round of the elections. The triumph of the peasant wing, confirmed at Party congresses in 1908 and 1910, would later result into quarrels with the Agrarian Party that would scold the peasant Left for being reluctant to cooperate during the elections in 1911. Eventually, the Party of the Catholic People would break up, the clash between the Party Left and the Agrarians being one of the main reasons.
However, nobody could foresee it in 1906. The new leadership, with Secretary T. J. Jiroušek being its moving spirit, attempted to organize the Party on a modern pattern. First, they intended to replace a traditional conglomerate of non-political Catholic fellowships and clubs by a well-organized structure of local Party branches. Establishing such structures with organized membership, membership fees and cards was probably seen as the most efficient way of unifying heterogeneous subjects that merged into the Party. At the same time, the leadership wanted to abolish old practices of choosing delegates to conventions and congresses: up to then, country branches used to delegate people who lived close to the capital. Thus, a rigid Prague-based elite emerged, making decisions irrespectively of opinions of the country. The new Party leaders therefore insisted that every local branch should be represented by a local delegate.

Unfortunately, they gauged the Party’s reaction wrong and tried to enforce their will in a dictatorial manner. Members of the Party, especially those grouped around the circle called Vlast (The Homeland), resented this approach and quite understandably refused to be bullied. Privileging the local political branches one-sidedly, the leadership ousted all affiliated non-political groups and sympathizers from any control over Party matters. Furthermore, with the new system introduced, some regions lost most (if not all) delegates that represented them in the Party hierarchy. These – and not only these – unsolved problems resulted into an open crisis in 1907–08, when the party leadership met with a strong opposition. The malcontents appealed against the Party statutes and wished to change the situation within the Party. Backed by its supporters from Southern and Eastern Bohemia, the Association of Czech Catholic Peasants headed the opposition. After all, it had struggled for power since mid 1907.

6 Count V. Schönborn (Vice-Chairman), R. Horský (Chairman), Fr. Novák (Treasurer), F. Rey, F. Krejza, T. J. Jiroušek (Secretary), Antonín Barcal (peasant), František Count Kinský, V. Myslivec, V. Špaček, Jiří Čadek, Alois Prine, Josef Polák, Jaroslav Astr. Cf.: Výkonný výbor strany katolického lidu. Naše listy, 16, 1906, No. 1, 1 September, p. 4. Výkonný výbor strany katolického lidu. Meč, 4, 1906, No. 4, 6 September, p. 100.

7 Organizační rádce a nový organizační řád strany katolického lidu v Čechách. Praha (Prague), undated – The statutes introduced a four-level structure of branches (local, district, diocesan, and the umbrella of the provincial headquarters). Local branches were to be constituted as loose groups of males and females over 14 respecting the Party programme. These were usually established in villages and towns or in districts of large cities (the latter were united in so-called central branches). Every man or woman who received a membership card issued by a local branch was considered a Party member. A local branch elected its committee of 5 members and a committeeman. A branch was also responsible for keeping membership records and collecting membership fee. The statutes recommended founding a youth branch for young people between 14 and 20 to each local branch. The Party had (supposedly) 350–400 local branches in the early 1908. District branches were to be founded provisionally in each of 75 judicial districts and later reorganized according to election districts (after the general suffrage has been introduced). Only 3 diocesan committees emerged – in dioceses of Prague, Hradec Králové and České Budějovice. Cf.: JIROUŠEK, T. J.: Pod zákonem strany. Naše listy, 17, 1907, No. 18, 28 December, p. 1. Výkonný výbor strany katolického lidu. Naše listy, 16, 1906, No. 1, 1 September, p. 4. Zemská konference strany katolického lidu v Čechách. Naše listy, 17, 1907, No. 1, 31 August, p. 7. – Beside a broader executive committee, a select committee consisting of six members (apparently those who lived in Prague and its vicinity) was established. It did not work well and E. Jung replaced it by a professionally run secretariat in the summer of 1908. Cf.: Výkonný výbor. Nový věk, 1, 1908, No. 47, 21 August, p. 4. Výkonný výbor. Venkovan, 1, 1908, No. 42, 20 August, p. 3.
Toward the end of 1907, an unabated fight broke out over the question of choosing delegates to the Party’s 2nd congress planned for 5–6 January 1908. Instigated by Jiroušek, the executive committee decided that representatives of local branches should only be eligible. Peasant leaders felt much aggrieved at what they saw as flagrant discrimination of 11,000 Catholic peasants and 7,000 Catholic workers. They demanded that the congress should be open at least to peasants’ committee men from those towns and villages where no local branches had been established. After many hesitations, the Party leadership accepted this proposal, only to sweep it under the carpet after T. J. Jiroušek’s intervention. Under these circumstances, the Association withdrew its support of the congress. Afraid of an intra-party breach, the executive committee summoned a negotiating commission that offered several suggestions like incorporating more peasants into the executive committee. Though tempestuous, the debate resulted into mutual consent. Jiroušek lost the post of Secretary and Catholic peasants received seven seats (out of twenty) in a new executive committee.8

The 2nd congress seemed to settle all disputes. However, a new Secretary A. Drápalík resigned very soon, being succeeded by E. Jungr, a protégé of V. Myslivec who pulled strings to get the post for him. Count V. Schönborn, V. Řezníček and V. Dvorský left the executive committee afterwards, giving the Left wing free rein. Despite what might have appeared like an intra-party coup, the Right within the Party did not give up completely – it only switched roles with its adversaries. After having been at helm between 1906 and 1908, it was in opposition from 1908 to 1910, launching its counteroffensive early in 1909.

The Party congress of 1908 was an important watershed in the young Party’s history. The vision conceived by its founders – that of a single entity embracing all factions and flourishing under a unifying umbrella of the Party leadership – was to perish within following two years. This pattern might have worked successfully only if several prerequisites were fulfilled: (first) The structure of the executive committee should have been well-balanced, representing all factions within the heterogeneous and diverse Party membership; (second) A strong, charismatic person should have led the Party, respected by all factions and able to settle disputes; (third) Aware of common tasks and objectives, the Party should have put its members under discipline, tolerating different opinions at the same time. Unfortunately, none of these conditions was fulfilled.

After the congress, the executive committee and its policy shifted to the left, anxious to please the most influential group of members – peasants. Business enterprises established by the Party were beneficial only for the countryside. At the same time, members of the General Trades Union Congress of Christian Workers, the Association of Czech Catholic Traders, the Association of Catholic Intellectuals, as

---

8 Following members of the Association of Catholic Peasants were elected to the executive committee: F. Šafránek (Chairman of the Association) – Vice-Chairman of the Party, J. Adámek, V. Myslivec, V. Holanský, J. Krejčí (Vice-Chairman of the Association), G. Mazanec and M. Záruba. Cf.: Po sjezdu. Venkovan, 1, 1908, No. 11, 16 January, p. 1. – On the other hand, workers had only one representative, Catechist P. F. Jukl, President of the Trades Union Congress.
well as clerks, students and – partly – women and youth, felt slighted. The same feeling grew in conservative circles, lacking any representation since their leaders had resigned from the Party leadership. Naturally, unrest and discontent grew, all the more so because the Party bosses had at their disposal several influential and prosperous periodicals for peasants (e. g., *Venkovyan* and *Selský list*; they also controlled *Nový věk* and *Meč* while V. Myslivec was an editor of *Čech*); on the other hand, the Party press organ dwindled in importance. In fact, the catholic peasants’ papers started to create the image of the Party, doing the whole movement disservice. They often attacked the Agrarian Party and expressed opinions of petty peasants and smallholders, sometimes half-baked or extremely radical. Reputedly, this was the reason why pro-Catholic nobility drifted away from the political Catholicism. Separatist trends of conservative groups within the Party were invigorated at the same time. Never keen supporters of Christian-Social movement, the Czech conservative aristocrats inclined even more to the Agrarians. (From their point of view, political Catholicism was weak both politically and economically and, to make things even worse, the Party of the Catholic People advocated progressive taxation and wanted universal suffrage to be extended to the provincial parliament.) Conservatives within the Party blamed the pro-Christian-Social leaders for alleged departure from the Church, branding them as Social Democrats. They wished the Party policy to harmonize with decisions of the episcopacy, canonries, diocesan committees and corporations like *Pius' Society*.

The situation within the Party appeared to be chaotic if not anarchic. The Party was poorly managed and discipline deteriorated both in the centre and in provinces. Early in 1910, on the eve of the Party’s 3rd congress, the conservative Right stood up against the Christian-Social leaders. The conservative faction issued a so-called *Memorandum* to bishops and Party activists on 21 February. The document bore signatures of seventeen eminent figures. Apart from just criticism of the narrow policy in favour of one class and profession it also reproved the chaotic situation, to which its signatories contributed, an alleged support to ‘antireligious elements’ and to the separation of the Church and State, etc. The signatories emphasized that they called for rectification, expecting the bishops to intervene.

After a thorough analysis we daresay that the Memorandum had one point and purpose: forging a single bloc of malcontents and winning wider support for the signatory elite before the congress. (We must not forget that the congress was to have settled the dispute between both wings; a new leadership of the Party was to be

---

9 The text was reprinted, i.a., in *Čech*, 35, 1910, No. 61, 3 March, pp. 3–4 and titled *Nejdůstojnějším Ordinariátům*. The memorandum was sent to 4 papers and all Bohemian parishes and also circulated as a leaflet.

In fact, a small faction consisting of a so-called Smíchov Group and loose clusters grouped around the Týden weekly and the Kolínský list could not stage a coup if they had not been supported by other faultfinders. The ‘plot theory’ becomes even more likely if we take account of the battle that raged over the elections of delegates to the congress. The battle – indeed, a beginning of an open quarrel within the Party – had more than one motive, but there was only one person that was generally recognized as a head of the opposition. An ambitious politician, V. Řezníček, came over to the Catholic movement after the general elections of 1907. As early as then he tried to win R. Horský to the idea of a big conservative party that would have brought together Catholics with Agrarians and Old Czechs. Though not unwilling at first, Horský soon changed his mind, considering a national party to be a thing of the past. Still undeterred, Řezníček kept advocating his idea of a unified party integrating the nobility, clergy, and other conservative elements and even admitted that such a party might exist besides the Catholic one if the Catholic should not join it. Being an editor of Týden and publishing articles in Hlas národa, an organ of the Old Czech Party, he held the reins in the periodicals widely popular with the Catholic clergy. After he had left the executive committee of the Party of the Catholic People, he had his hands free to launch a massive campaign against the committee. He persisted for almost a year, criticized both the left and right wing, scrutinized activities of members of the Viennese Parliament, called for cooperation with the Agrarians, and advocated a close union of the Party and the episcopate (he even sanctioned disbandment of the ‘unruly’ Club of the Catholic Clergy). In his interpretation, the party of the Catholic People should have been transformed into a purely conservative party. The Memorandum must therefore be perceived in this context.

Both wings within the Party nourished the hope that the 3rd congress (27–28 March 1910) would settle all disputes, modify the Party programme, amend the statutes and take care of the Party finances. Similarly, the new executive committee was expected to restore order and keep in line with the adopted programme and tactics. The conservatives believed in the restoration of the pre-1908 state of affairs but their hopes were dashed. Representatives of the peasants’ stream held the field, turning the congress into a popular affair, while the nobility and higher clergy were virtually missing. Myslivec’s faction took advantage of this fact and completed its victory. The conservative opposition was all but eliminated, though not without a fight. The congress was therefore quite uproarious and explosive.

The old leadership headed by Horský seemed to be willing to satisfy the opposition, if only partly, and to reconcile differences, as suggested the chairman’s opening speech mentioning more than once the German Zentrum Party. Horský emphasized

---

its integrating role: the Zentrum was an umbrella for various groups and factions united by their attitudes towards religious questions but diverse in their policy. Even those speakers who were well-disposed towards the Party leadership seemed to be tolerant of the conservative wing including the Czech Catholic nobility that, as they put it, should not have been excluded from Party ranks. At the same time they did not ignore existing differences. They blamed the aristocrats for not accepting the Party programme and not participating in enlightening the Catholic lower classes and urged them to go with the majority. The same speakers professed themselves to be conservatives preserving a precious heritage of the past but well aware that they could not stagnate and should have their finger on the pulse of the period. On the other hand, the congress denounced the Memorandum as well as attempts to establish a conservative party tinted with political Catholicism: an absolute majority of delegates voted for crossing names of the signatories off a list of candidates for the executive committee. Conservatives who had not signed the Memorandum were accepted, though, so that Party unity would not suffer.

Generally speaking, the Party leadership succeeded in advocating and continuing the programme trends embarked in 1908. To cope with the criticism of the situation within the Party was a harder task. The conservative faction and the left wing jointly attacked Secretary Jungr and demanded that he should be removed from his office – sometimes rather menacingly. The resolution concerning a Party press organ might have pleased the right-wing opposition, too, as it decreed to build up a daily paper, if possible in close cooperation with Pius’ Society. It was a delicate decision as the Society had backed the Memorandum and some of its leading figures even belonged to the signatories. However, the very idea of founding a newspaper owned by the Party or trying to transform Čech into a Party organ appears to be a watershed event with a grave impact on the further developments of the Party and Czech political Catholicism as a whole. The election of the executive committee, however tempestuous, ended in a compromise even after J. Vinopal had come forward with an alternative list. A special commission set up for the occasion prepared a balanced list of candidates and the new leadership was then voted by acclamation. Later it appeared that even several signatories of the Memorandum were approached and offered some posts but Canon Wünsch thwarted these attempts.

On the contrary, the antagonistic wings did not agree upon a name of the Party. The leadership insisted on the revived name, Czech Christian-Social Party, and railroaded it against the will of the opposition that resented the deletion of the adjective ‘Catholic’. Conservatives had a feeling that the Party was dissociating itself from Catholicism and the Church and was deviating from its objective – to integrate all

---

social strata and classes. Opponents of the new name even pointed out that Viennese Christian Socials were hostile toward a Czech minority in Lower Austria. V. Myslivec stood up for his Austrian fellow travellers, saying that their national policy – though not perfect – was much fairer than that of any other political party in German-speaking countries. The dispute over the Party name, however insignificant, would continue and strengthen the case for separatism of various factions.

The 3rd congress of the Party of the Catholic People was interpreted as a beginning of the Catholic offensive and closely monitored by all Czech papers. In reality, it was the beginning of its end. Even though the Catholic press raved about a compromise and settling all disputes, the congress strengthened the position of the popular wing and persuaded the conservatives that no reconciliation with Christian Socials is possible. Between 1910 and 1912, the Party of the Catholic People fell into four factions. The main body went on as the Christian-Social Party, its left wing – the Christian-Social People’s Party – broke away in 1912 while conservative elements had founded the Catholic-National Conservative Party as early as in 1911. A right faction left the latter in 1912, constituting itself into the People’s Party, a Czech specimen of a conservative party not necessarily linked with political Catholicism.