

John Paul II calls for East-West synod

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On Sunday, April 22, from the basilica of Velehrad in Czechoslovakia, the Pope John Paul II announced to the world the convocation of the Synod of the Bishops of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. Later the Secretary of the Synod, Msgr. Jan Schotte, during a brief press conference in Rome, called it "a surprise announcement, but not surprising," which is "located within the interest which John Paul II has manifested, from the outset of his pontificate, for the fate of the European continent and for the Church's mission in Europe." He also stressed that it would not just be a Synod for the East.

John Paul II's choice of Velehrad to make the announcement immediately evokes the spirit in which the important event is being seen. Velehrad holds the tomb of St. Methodius, who, with his brother St. Cyril, evangelized the peoples of the East, in respect for their culture and traditions, and in communion with the Roman Pontiff. Cyril and Methodius, the "Apostles of the Slavs," are the model for the Church's (and, we would add, any other cultural reference point's) attitude toward Europe: Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine Greeks by culture, knew how to become the apostles of the Slavs in the full sense of the word, and in their search for unity with the Apostolic See of Rome they interpreted the universal meaning of their mission in the deepest way. In 1980 the Pope had named them co-patrons of Europe.

With remarkable foresight, in his 1980 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II hoped that Europe would return to "breathing with both of its lungs, East and West." The crumbling of Eastern Europe's communist regimes is making that wish come true. Today, in the new Europe, it is a matter of rediscovering and rebuilding—rediscovering the Christian tradition, in nations where it was either cruelly combatted or, as in the West, skillfully replaced by materialistic ideologies—to build a new conscience, by education of the generations who in the East have been forced to accept 40 years of atheism and know almost nothing of their real history.

The Pope's trip to Czechoslovakia pointed the way that others may take in building a new Europe "with both lungs." "The Pope's visit," said John Paul II when he arrived, "the first in the more than millenary history of Christianity in these lands, symbolically closes a period in your journey and opens another. You now find yourself at the beginning of a great work of renewal."

He spoke of victory, "a victory which has its origins in

the heart of your sufferings. Your victory is the fruit of loyalty, which is an important aspect of faith. . . . Out of this loyalty came your liberation. It was not given from outside, it was born from inside, from the cross planted in your life." He went on, "For this reason you cannot now stop, you cannot turn back. You must rather keep moving forward in true liberty in Christ."

"I dare say that in this moment I am participating in a miracle," said Vaclav Havel, the playwright President. "The miracle is that in the country devastated by the ideology of hate, arrives the messenger of love; in the country devastated by the rule of the ignorant, arrives the messenger of love." At sundown the Pope and the President, after a private discussion, appeared on the balcony of Prague Castle, where only yesterday the gray Communist leaders had stupefied the masses with their propaganda. People exploded in joyful applause.

Vatican experts say the visit to Czechoslovakia was exceptional, coming only a few months after the country's democratization. Vatican diplomacy would traditionally have put priority on the already-announced trip of the Pope to Hungary, given the friendly relations between that nation and the Holy See. It seems that the Pope wanted to force the conjuncture, aided by the warm invitations of Havel's government, to immediately set up a dialogue with these peoples, the new democratic governments, the bishops, and clergy—a dialogue outside the Yalta diplomatic and institutional framework. This indicates the urgency of the Synod.

This framework is crucially important for the Soviets. Scholars who have recently visited the U.S.S.R. report a renewed demand for genuine spirituality coming from people victimized for seven decades by the regime's atheistic and nihilist propaganda. While most inhabitants of the U.S.S.R. are not atheistic, but deeply ignorant of human history, among the Orthodox believers and the people in ferment over the catastrophic socio-economic conditions, they report that a spontaneous admiration has arisen for the Pope in Rome, who travels around the world like a pilgrim speaking in the name of suffering humanity.

The gateway for access to the U.S.S.R., a missionary land of the Church, is Eastern Europe and the "key" of Cyril and Methodius's apostolate. The new acculturation of Russia could come through the tradition contained in the "historical memory" of Europe. It is in this dimension that the Church's role must be taken, and Pope Wojtyla is the principal interpreter of this need. Speaking in Prague to cultural leaders and students at the old St. Charles University, the Pontiff clearly posed the problem: "If Europe's historical memory does not reach beyond the ideals of the Enlightenment, its new unity will have superficial foundations. Christianity, brought into this continent by the Apostles and penetrated into its various parts by the actions of Benedict, Cyril, Methodius, Adalbert, and a countless host of saints, is at the very roots of European culture."