

Introduction

The fall of the *Berlin Wall*, the disappearance of the *Iron Curtain* and the collapse of the communist regimes in the countries belonging to the *Eastern Block* brought about changes in the socio/political system which had consequences, including that of the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent nations. These events had a decisive effect on Slovakia which had to learn how to direct and manage society in its greatly desired, but equally demanding, autonomy.

The Religious Institutes in Slovakia, on adjusting to the new situation which arose during the first years of religious freedom after the collapse of communism, found it was not easy to find a proper role or direction for their presence in a society which highlighted many demands born of its new circumstances. They put great efforts into the renovation and reconstruction of their buildings, which had been almost completely destroyed during the previous forty years through neglect or misuse, and into setting up structures in those places where they wished to take up their *ordinary life*. The high number of recruits to their way of life during the early years of *liberation* led the superiors of institutes to believe in the need to restore their great residences.

The immediate short term solutions, however, left some unanswered questions as there was a decrease in the number of vocations, numerous desertions and enormous difficulties arose in managing big, old, historical buildings, as the convents were, in urgent need of repairs. At this point, the religious became aware of the lack of a profound evaluation of the trials and sufferings they had undergone and which they had survived due to their ability to adapt to circumstances during the communist persecution. This evaluation should have been the starting point of their adaptation to the situation of a new, emerging society. They failed to recognize the precious *capital* accumulated during their unique, precious and constantly maturing experiences in the time of oppression.

In this way, the relations of the Religious Institutes with society again became an acute problem because of the not very successful re-launch of their *ordinary life* of consecration. It is also possible to note, on a general level, that there was a search within the religious life for an approach that was adapted to "the world" and this is, not rarely, indicated as being among the first causes of the lack of prosperity of the congregations.

When a Religious Institute examines its relationships with the world in a retrospective reflection the starting point is usually that of its internal life and the works in which it is engaged in order to contribute to the development of society. Rarely can it be found to go in the opposite direction, i.e., from the interference of society which exercises an influence on the internal life of the institute and causes, or at least sets in motion, the process of change. The results of such a study are prevalently of a negative connotation.

The above indicated realities aroused an interest and attracted some to become occupied, with due seriousness, with the problem of the relationships between society and the religious institute, or, more precisely, to draw attention to and evaluate the role of society and of other possible external factors in the changes which occur in the life of a Religious Institute, espe-

cially in its community life. The question facing us at the outset could be expressed as follows: What influence of, or part played by, society brought about the changes in the communal life of the religious Province in these circumstances? What were the results of such intervention?

A particular case¹, the female congregation of the Slovak Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis², which was, in a certain sense, an extreme case, was chosen for the study of the problem lived in Czechoslovakia during the forty years between 1948 and 1989. It lived in grave conditions determined by an atheistic State and, in addition to the testing of the solidity of its essential foundations, was subjected to a test of its vital capacity. The study could be expressed as an attempt to answer the question: what could have produced this influence of society on the communal life of a religious Province?

Attention was also drawn to the subject by the retrospective reflection, the recounting of tales, accounts and memories of the Sisters who had lived under the communist regime. The Sisters, with great nostalgia, remembered and retold their experiences of the religious life at a time of persecution and suppression at

¹ It was not possible to examine all the religious institutes which lived in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989, both because of the great extent of the research and the lack of documentation, as the communist government destroyed the archives, libraries and other documentary sources of the religious institutes in the 50s and these could not be recovered during the whole period of the government.

² The Slovak Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis became an autonomous Province in 1947. Having a total of 95 Sisters - 83 professed and 12 novices - and 6 aspirants, the Province had great hopes and plans for the future. However, their hopes and expectations were dashed, though not totally destroyed, very shortly afterwards when the Communist Party seized political power in Czechoslovakia and began a methodical process which it thought would lead to the liquidation of religion, religious beliefs and religious structures, including those of the Catholic Church and its Religious Institutes.

the hands of the atheistic State and awakened in others both surprise and a desire to approach the *mystery* of their own lives.

We came up against different problems when working on this subject. This was due to the fact that there was no previous research into the subject and there was no collaborating written documentation. The only attempt to provide data regarding the religious life in countries under a communist regime was that of a group of Sisters from the United States of America who, in 2005, under the guidance of Sr. Margaret Nacke and Sr. Mary Savie, interviewed Sisters from various Congregations in Slovakia, one of the eight countries of the communist bloc³.

Other studies of the consecrated life in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989 concentrated on the first period of communist government (between 1948 and 1953), that is, of the forced evacuation of convents and the deportation of Sisters. No study has been made of the other periods and no overall picture has been established.

Very few documents relating to the period 1948 to 1989 were found in the archives of the Slovak Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Žilina, Slovakia, as they had been confiscated by the State in 1950 and the greater part of them destroyed⁴. It was also possible to trace a little historical material in the General Archives of the Congregation in Rome even though communication between the Province and the government of

³ Sisters Margaret Nacke and Mary Savie, are members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, Kansas. Their motive for making the research was to document the religious life lived in Central and Eastern Europe during the period of communism and to present the Sisters' radical faithfulness to their vows.

⁴ Research of documents was also carried out in the Archives of the General Curia of the Order of Friars Minor in Rome, the Provincial Archives of the Friars Minor Observant, Capuchin and Conventual in Bratislava, Slovakia, the Archives of other Franciscan Sisters in Slovakia, the examination of the Responses to the Questionnaires from the Secretariat for Religious Institutes in Czechoslovakia from 1968 on and some books, chronicles and reports written by historians.

the Congregation was very difficult during all those years and almost impossible during the first twenty. Recourse was also had to the Archives of the Institute of the Memory of the Nation, which has its headquarters in Bratislava, where some documents of the State Security Services are kept. We were only able to find fragmentary histographical material relating to the interventions and raids carried out by this state institution.

There was, however, a second kind of source at our disposal, the memory of the Sisters who had survived the communist regime. They gave spontaneous oral accounts and declarations of their experiences. In order to identify which things referred most to the religious life in their stories we interviewed a specific sample of them about their memories of community life in common. The interviews gave the Sisters ample margins of autonomy so that they could describe what they felt were the main elements of the religious life. From their descriptions and on the basis of the influence exercised by the policies of the State on the organizational structures of the Slovak Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis, we believed we could identify three groups of Sisters within the Province, corresponding to the three political periods. This division of the religious helped us not only to point out some changes which came about, but to follow the processes of change from one group to the next, which would not have been possible to identify without the division of the Sisters into three groups.

We succeeded in obtaining material which we tried to integrate in such a way as to present a well structured account of developments in the successive parts of the book. The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the historical and political situation in the country. Chapters I to V introduce us to the political, social and religious situations of Czechoslovakia between the years 1948 and 1968, pointing out especially the situation of the Catholic Church in Slovakia. The measures taken by the State against the Church, with particular regard to the institutes of religious life, will then be dealt with. It will be

important to ascertain the role that the religious of the Franciscan charism assumed in the Church and what attitude they had towards the regime.

Part II presents the situation of the School Sisters of St. Francis immediately before and during the communist regime. In chapters V to IX we consider if the eventual external influences had any effect on the internal organization of the fraternity and, if it did, how was it worked out. We continue with the analysis of the foundations of the fraternities indicated by the Sisters with the aim of ascertaining if the model of their community life lived before 1948 remained unchanged or it was some change brought about by external interference alone or also by internal demands from the sisterhood. The question of the inevitable conflict with the State over the prohibition, and even penalization, of one their possible apostolates also emerges.

With the conviction that the experience of a Religious Institute does not only make up its own exclusive and private history, but pertains also to the *patrimony* of the whole Church in its universality, it is hoped that this work will make some contribution, however small, to the present efforts being made by the Institutes of the Consecrated Life engaged in the continuous search for the renewal of the Religious Life.