

...BRIDGES... Number 11, 2006: Communing Together

on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group and PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network by Joyce Michael

It is New Year's Eve in Prague, and firecrackers are popping all about! However, I remain focused on Christmas Eve, which climaxed with the mid-night mass that I attended with my landlord and landlady at a small Roman Catholic Church in our neighborhood. I had been eagerly anticipating that event because a joyful Christmas mass written by a Czech composer named Jan Ryba in 1796 was to be incorporated into the service. John and I had been privileged to hear the Ryba Mass performed in concert on other occasions, but I supposed that it would have particular power in the context of an actual worship service.

As we entered the candle-lit church, the darkness seemed comforting and peaceful, but suddenly, at the stroke of midnight, the sanctuary became as bright as day! Light had broken into the darkness; the Prince of Peace had been born; a new day had dawned, whether we were ready or not. I was suddenly filled with the sense of hope that I had experienced at other midnight masses which I attended during my first years in Prague.

Ryba's music provided a moving backdrop for the scripture, homily, and Eucharistic liturgy. There was warmth, beauty, and radiance in that place, but I was particularly struck when I heard the priest stressing that the cup of the new covenant is "FOR ALL OF YOU." You see, while John and I were in the U.S.A., someone told us that Catholics now receive both the bread and the wine during communion. That was a surprise to us, but the priest placed such emphasis on the words "FOR ALL OF YOU" that I wondered if communion "in both kinds" had become a reality in the Catholic Church. However, when the Eucharist was served, the communicants were given only the bread; the wine was reserved for the priests. Thus, I was struck anew by the radical departure represented by an ecumenical communion service that I had experienced earlier in the month.

Upon returning to Prague, I received an invitation to a meeting of the Czech Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women whose membership includes both Catholics and Protestants. I was excited to read that during Advent, that group would be celebrating the Eucharist together for the very first time. That event would be especially significant in this country where both bread and wine were first served to lay Christians at the Church of Martin-in-the-Wall in 1414. That act led to centuries of struggle between advocates of Jan Hus and staunch Catholics whose brutal Counter-reformation measures eventually crushed the Czech Reformation.

Despite the passage of time, resulting divisions between Czech Catholics and Protestants remain fairly entrenched. Yet, deep bonds have formed between the Catholic and Protestant women who are part of the Ecumenical Forum. Thus, the idea of holding a joint communion service received a positive response, which led to conversations with denominational leaders and a theological consideration of the Eucharist, led by a Hussite pastor. Eventually, a liturgy was prepared, and a letter was sent urging every member of the Forum to be present for this event. That invitation especially encouraged individuals who did not feel comfortable receiving communion in that context to come and be part of the circle of

unity nevertheless.

On December 8, as I approached the meeting room at the Franciscan Monastery, the voices that I heard practicing the liturgy already manifested a sense of awe. Thus I wondered, "How will the sacrament be different from the rehearsal?" The answer was forth-coming: As the bread was passed around a long rectangular table, each woman received the gift of grace as an individual and we repeatedly received that gift as a group. Slowly and reverently, we took the bread and ate. Then, as the cup made its way around the table, we drank long draughts of love. Slowly and reverently, old divisions associated with the chalice were relinquished, and even those who did not partake of the elements were recipients of the new covenant.

In the wake of the divisions that often shatter our world and sometimes threaten our church, hope frequently seems to be a fragile commodity. Nevertheless, the Eucharist celebrated by the Ecumenical Forum offers a powerful symbol of the possibility that peace can prevail over strife, and that long nights of longing can be illumined by unity. As the priest so aptly stressed, the new covenant is FOR ALL OF US! Thus, we must dare to nurture the legacy of grace!