

...BRIDGES... Number 11, 2007: “Resounding Hope”

by Joyce Michael for the ECCB’s American Working Group & the PC(USA)’s Czech Mission Network

Some years ago, when I was serving a neighborhood church in a county seat town, a particular funeral director always phoned me when the deceased person’s family was not associated with a church. At that time and in that place, it was automatically assumed that a funeral entailed a Christian service carried out by an ordained minister. However, in a secular society impacted by decades of communist rule, which supplanted religious rituals with token observances that were severed from their deeper roots, funerals sometimes take a very different form.

Thus, my friend looked troubled as she began to speak. A childhood companion had died at the age of thirty-five, and her funeral had just taken place. However, since her family had no religious roots, it had been an unusually sad event. Parents, family, and many young friends sat together in silence, listening to the popular music that the young woman had enjoyed. And that was all that happened. Not a single word was spoken in an attempt to context the women’s life in the profound questions that are invariably raised when a young person dies. No prayers were said, no tributes were shared, no glimmer of hope was extended to the people who had come to bid their companion farewell, and my friend was left feeling bewildered. Indeed, she might have been speaking for me when she said, “I have always thought that although ours is a secular society, it is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. I have always believed that ours is a Christian nation at heart, but this funeral has shown me a different reality. What is the function of a funeral without any words of hope?”

My friend’s observations told me that I must also critique my recurrent conclusion that the secular Czech society remains profoundly connected to its Christian underpinnings, and thus continues to manifest the grace and goodness that Jesus commanded us to embrace and embody. The barren image of grieving people leaving a “concert” of recorded popular music suggested that at least one segment of the atheistic sector of Czech society does not know that “even the darkness is not dark to God.” At least part of that secular society remains a stranger to the hope that underlies the Christian faith.

Thus I shared my friend’s perplexity until a few days later when a member of the

Synodal Council invited John and me to a special Advent concert. “There will be a Mozart piano concerto and the Ryba mass,” he invitingly said. I smiled expectantly, as I anticipated hearing the classic Czech Christmas mass that has come to mean so much to me in recent years. That evening, we found ourselves seated in the balcony of the Rudolfinum, surrounded by members of the choir that would perform the mass following the intermission. Looking at the program, we learned that similar groups from throughout the Republic had come to Prague to be part of an exceptional event.

Expectation continued to mount as the singers filled the stage behind the orchestra and the lofts beside of the organ, and when the familiar strains of music began to resound, I had a strong sense that neither the soloists nor the choirs were just mouthing words. Although the lyrics were not as clear as they tend to be in more intimate venues, the story of Christ’s birth was becoming a living reality in that concert hall. Thus, by the time the final Alleluias rang out, I had the same conviction – that a new day of hope and promise was at hand – which I had experienced last Christmas Eve when the Ryba composition was the backdrop of an actual mass that I attended at a neighborhood Catholic Church. An encore of Czech carols, which concluded with the audience joining in the singing of “Narodil se Kristus Pán” (Christ the Lord is Born), further confirmed that the melody of hope has not been silenced by secularity. Yet, we must find a way for this melody to spill out of concert halls and churches and into the streets. Only thus will hurting people be able to discover that there really is a resounding hope that can bind up their wounds and make them whole. Let it be so!