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Statement by the Movement for Civil Liberties: *Jan Palach's challenge*.

Twenty years ago, Jan Palach, a student, burnt himself to death at Wenceslas Square. It was not suicide but self-sacrifice. It was a last-minute bid to arouse his fellow-citizens and above all to take issue with the growing defeatism of the country's leaders, and protest against their betrayals. The message of Jan Palach's action was not "Go and immolate yourselves", but "Go and defend yourselves":

fight to defend your human dignity and freedom, despite the difficulties and even at the cost of retreat.

At the time, he won the minds of the Czechs and Slovaks and for a short while they were once again the determined community they had been in August 1968. The country's leadership, however, had no wish to understand Palach's sacrifice and consummated their betrayal just a few short months after his death. But even many of those who, at Palach's funeral, pledged themselves not to bend the knee again nor let lies hold sway over them, soon recanted those resolutions.

However, for all of us the action taken by Jan Palach, and after him Jan Zajíc, was both painful and tragic. Moreover, the feeling at the time was that the sacrifice of those two young men was in vain. However, now that our society is gradually reviving itself once more – unerring proof of which were last year's successive mass demonstrations – it is clear this was not the case. This reawakening would have been out of the question had many Czechs and Slovaks, both known and unknown, not remained true to their word and had they not gone on living and working for the past twenty years in the spirit of Jan Palach's freedom call.

Freedom exacts a price. Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc were not alone in paying with their lives: Jan Patočka and Pavel Wonka did likewise. The price is paid – in the form of imprisonment and discrimination – by all those who have worked publicly for moral and social renewal.

Jan Palach's appeal speaks to us across the years. It speaks to people from all walks of life, irrespective of age or social group. It speaks most directly, however, to the younger generation, young workers and students. Jan Palach's appeal continues to be a source of moral and social inspiration to young people studying – as he once did – in various parts of higher education.

We recall yet again that Palach's message was not "Go and die", but "Go and do what you yourself can towards moulding your own and the nation's life in the spirit of

truth, both perceived and experienced. Help restore meaningfulness to our common destiny once more through your courage to act. Go in renewed hope that the government of your affairs will return to your own hands. Go, for your moment is nigh.”

On behalf of the Provisional Co-ordinating Committee of the Movement for Civil Liberties

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