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# DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY WITH RELIGIOUS THEME

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## **Abstract**

The goal of our study is to point at historic and contemporary tendencies in art (documentary photography) in the region of Slovakia and Czech Republic by the means of reflection of documentary photographic concepts with religious themes and iconography. The study investigates intrinsic motivational elements of interpretation of faith in wider cultural, global and media contexts. By the means of comparison, the study analyses the presence of religious themes, religious symbolism, iconography that significantly affect the relationship between spiritual and religious values and the medium of photography. At the same time, the study clarifies and evaluates the evolution of the sacral theme and its interpretation. It explores the formal signs of religious manifestations and, in relation to past and the current emancipation of visual expression of art, points at consecutive receding from the severe Pre-Raphaelit symbolism of religious themes of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the striking individual platform for expression. The empirical part of the study profiles prominent figures of Slovak documentary photography and elaborates on the notion of retrieving religious message in particular authorial concepts.

*Keywords:* art, religious themes, cultural contexts, Slovakia, authorial concepts

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## **1. Introduction**

The terms religiousness and spirituality are becoming more and more frequent in the fine art of the last decades. These terms come out directly from the territory of religion. Neo-Platonism, which perceived the term in sharp opposition to the material reality, used the term in studying historical sources. However, such opposition does not seem legitimate from the point of current interpretation of religious themes in art where a human being is presented as ‘spirit in world and spirit in body’.

The diversity of spiritualities within religious manifestations that originate from the exuberant influence of ‘Sanctus Spiritus’ (The Holy Spirit) is also becoming an important question. In the territory of art, this spiritual dimension manifests itself strikingly in the author - creation (intention) and spectator -

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reception (interpretation), relationships. Therefore it is the relationship to a neighbour on every existence level of human being. From the point of such division it is not as much about spiritual or religious art as it is about spiritual and religious elements in art.

## 2. Religious elements in art

Art and religion are two different territories. For art, formal representation is fundamental, whereas for *homo religiosus*, living devotion to God. However, there is a certain structural analogy of both territories, a certain commonality context in a theme. In his 1980 speech to artists in Munich, Pope John Paul II unravelled the commonality: “The theme of the Church and the theme of artists as publicists is a human, a vision of the human, a truth about the human, the ‘Ecce Homo’, to which belongs his history, his world and surroundings, as much as social, economic and political context” [1].

At the same time on a different place he did not deny a certain level of disintegration of cultural and stylistic unity by mentioning that: “A gap developed between the Church and art that kept widening and deepening. Mutual estrangement grew due to the criticism of the Church and Christianity, even religion itself. The Church has become, which is understandable to a certain degree, suspicious of the modern spirit and its various modes of expression” [1, p. 382-384].

Kuschel also adds: “It is essential to mention the necessity of a specific diversity of both values, whereas the discussion of ‘religious art’ is disapproved the discussion of ‘religiously relevant art’ (religiously, spiritually relevant elements in art) is proposed in its stead” [2].

## 3. Emancipation of visual expression in historical context

If we consider in the study the concepts and programmes of documentary photography in the Slovak and Czech Republic from the point of religious themes, it is necessary, from the point of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, to point out the relationship between art and religion, specifically between art and the Church, which has, since the Age of Reason, has changed radically. “Art is not *ancilla* or a servant to the Church as it was treated until the end of baroque. The most important artistic statements are not done by custom-made art, but in the so-called voluntary art. Art is perceived as an independent reality that makes its own laws and rules. There is no other way to mediate that which interprets an image. Art is considered as an equal partner of religion.” [3]

From this aspect not only it is the mediator of religious truths, the ‘pauper bible’. It conveys subjective feelings of its author, his/her personal aesthetics and intimate transcendental experience in its own unique authorial way. Given the aforementioned past art has gradually receded and abandoned religious themes (the last major recurrence to religious statements manifested itself in paintings of

Pre-Raphaelists and Symbolists in 19<sup>th</sup> century). In spite of that we come across religious themes rather frequently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art and photography.

“The art of a 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be regarded in a detached manner compared to the art of previous periods. It represents, at least historically speaking, the consequence or the result of a pursuit of the art of the past, thus reflecting the artistic and aesthetic spirit of the present. In its connections to the field of religion the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflects this search, the diversity of forms and artistic expressions offers the proof of their intensity and of the way of understanding and perceiving the religious feeling.” [4]

“Not only are the culture and objects of culture an intellectual problem in a strict, abstract sense of the word, they are a territory ultimately of spirituality, the permanent and serious distinction in the light of the Gospel with the objective to identify values and antivalues of culture, so that we could build upon what is valuable and fight against antivalues” [5]. At the same time, Carl Ráhner says: “We live in era in which it is simply necessary to courageously head toward new and untried, right to the outermost frontiers” [6].

In such a close projection of collective good the artists and intellectuals are the embodiment of the conflict between the desire for God and at the same time the desire for individual freedom and happiness together with ruthless mechanisms of political-economical progress of the society. The contexts of tension and dynamic processes of secularization of society is the most intensified by the discontinuity and fragmentation of historic, religious and cultural function of art which is implicitly tied to and fixed on the spiritual and moral call of the Ten Commandments. T.S. Eliot diagnoses this conflict of the contemporary culture as a crisis of ontological vacuum. According to him, neither what the author captures, nor how he captures the religious reality is important, as the religious axiom lies in the assumption of something deeper, existential, something that has an immediate relationship to a human being and God.

#### **4. The levels of interpretation of sacral theme in art**

“In the years 1913-14 Kazimír Malevič painted The Black Square on white background which can be understood exactly as an absence of world harmony. Malevič not only responded to the Western art, he also responded to the Eastern symbols. His painting had a peculiar, formal thematic, cosmological worldwide and crisiological scope. Malevič called the painting an ‘absolute icon’.” [7]

The scholarly community of art theorists in Anglo-American geopolitical territory, to which Slovakia (Bohemia) belongs, constitutes in the present-day the plurality of thought exploring the issue of iconography and defining the approach to interpretation of artwork. This dispute has in several cases used ideological resources. The critical reflection of exploring the ideological background (how to interpret the sacral themes) remind of, in the contexts of contemporary social mentality, the territory of conflicting theories such as

current fragmentary image analysis, postmodern aesthetics, social history, iconography, Semiology, neo-marxism, or feminism.

From the point of art evolution (visual theories) it is necessary to consider the value of relationship of the author to the given (religious) theme, the relationship of a spectator to the work in question, but moreover what the work brings in a given social political situation. "When interpreting a picture the significant sources are those that, in parallel, the medium of photography is capable of reflecting: the evolution of visual theories, the position of depicted reality as a gate into the world of illusion, symbolics, mystique, and at the same time the interconnection of technology and identification of the author in a personal story." [8]

P. Florenskij tried to analyse the creation of a work of art and inspiratory premises (spiritual channels) of the creative process. Even he admits that the inspiration comes from above. He defines the process not as listening (hearing) to an inner voice, but as seeing. He characterizes the process as a 'phase of ascent' - the calling of the artist to give the invisible voice of God its corporeal form in our cosmos, it is a sort of incarnation, embodiment that leads us 'a reabilus ad realiora', from what is real to what is even more real. Florenskij assures us that this is not an illusion. The spiritual experience that can be lived through is "more detached than any other earthly detachments, more than any of them it is substantial and real" [9].

Ernst Gombrich, one of the most influential figures of traditional history of art, defines the status of artwork as a definite product of what the author intended, and the task of the interpreter is to unveil the intent. Gombrich's positivistic view "professes a radical faith in the possibility of recognizing the meaning as a whole entity in the artwork, a certain form of transhistoric truth and knowledge. The artwork is perceived as a collection of normative, universal values, as a canon that unifies the author, his contemporary audience and the interpreter." [10] As an antipole to mentioned approaches stand strategies of left-wing theorists (T.J. Clark, Michael Baxandall) which advance the meaning, value and message of the artwork into a later part as something that takes shape in the process of interpretation. "The subjectivism of the spectator and interpreter are perceived on equal terms with the intent of the author. The notion changes radically the social status of the author and shifts the significances from what does the artwork mean to what does it amount to socially. The artwork is not a product of individual (often mystified creator in the sense of Gombrich), but a product of a specific social situation in which it was created and performed." [10, p. 14] 'The capturable is uncapturable' is from the point of the mentioned diversification of visual interpretation Barthes' metaphorical 'punctum' that is characterized by adding something to the image. Even left-wing Barthes admits that in the picture there is something that cannot be seen, it is a blind spot, a desire for something that is beyond the picture, something that is transcendent in nature.

## **5. Slovak documentary photography with religious elements**

Religious themes are not defined (in postmodern) in opposition to religion (God). Here, the medium of photography has a different role: to join the aesthetic with ethic (moral) and as such it is another continual transformation of the project of modernism.

The study of religious elements in documentary photography in the Slovak republic (Bohemia) represents a natural generational change of former authors (Martin Martinček, Karol Kállay, Fero Tomík, Markéta Luskáčová, Tibor Huszár, Maroš Madačov). It analyses the post-November '89 state of the theme and studies the transformation of visual strategies in authorial concepts of the middle generation (Andrej Bán, Alan Hyža, Jozef Ondzík) and the young generation (Boris Németh, Andrej Lojan, Michal Fulier, Laco Maďar, Matúš Zajac). The authors of the older generation (Jindřich Štreit, Pavol Breier, Jozef Sedlák), who already surveyed in secret the theme during the former regime and after the November 1989 officially, comprise a sort of intermediary generation. The study investigates and conceives historic, social, and political limits of the medium of photography, and acknowledges the medium a higher value than that of just archive of events or time lapse of the trade. Visual records of religious manifestations point not only as to how to classify and interpret these visual documents from the point of religion (the Church). Various projects which documented religious events during socialism registered a significant interpretational inversion. In that time they represented one of the many political and spiritual activities as to how to defy the dictatorship. Together with a selection of authors we incorporated into the study their comments and confessions that point at the deeper motivation, personal spirituality and the experience of the authors with what is beyond the picture, what the author experiences when documenting the religious theme.

### ***5.1. Pre-revolution and post-revolution era in Slovak documentary photography***

Consequently with the current interpretations of religion in Slovak documentary photography and for the sake of complexity of the study it is important to lay out the historical contexts. 1989, the year of the Revolution, which is considered as a breakthrough not only in the context of social situation, but of art (photography) as well, is an important starting point. The pre-revolution era was officially under the socialist regime. The documentary photography in many cases surveyed the propagandist events. The political regime of the time tried its best to incorporate politics into everyday life and to weed out every single religious manifestation tied to folklore or Christian rituals. "Many interesting artworks, even whole authorial collections still remain unpublished and unknown in wider context." [11] Inhabitants mainly of the countryside and mountain regions did not however give up their natural human need of faith traditionally bound to Christianity.

In 2013, the exhibition *Absorbed by beauty* was opened in Slovak National Gallery. With its choice of artworks and cycles, the exhibition reflects just the era of socialism in documentary photography, specifically the fifties.

At the same time the philosophy of the exhibition subverts the vestige that during this time the documentary photography captured exclusively propagandistic and constructional themes. In several authorial cycles, we meet with so-called 'poetry of life' that admits and openly interprets the situation of the time. Aside from political ceremonies the authors noticed those that are bound strongly with our country, however, at that time they were not subject to media attention. Traditional Christian rituals were conducted rather on the margin of society. From this era the photos from Viliam Malík's First communion, the depiction of gypsy children on the planes under Tatras and their metaphorical rebirth to grooms and brides of God. "Anton Šmotlák captured such ceremony before the front of the castle in Topoľčianky..." [11]

Well-known to the contemporary spectator are Karol Kállay's photos, which in the first half of the 1950s captured the life of sisters in Jasov convent. "That is to say, in 1950 the state authority closed monasteries and the rest of the monks were concentrated in several convents, the Jasov convent among other. Kállay was particularly absorbed by the life of the secluded community - he captured probably their obligatory work and during their prayers." [11] Religious themes the publication of which was neither desired, nor endorsed, were depicted by other authors. Igor Grossman mediates the atmosphere of All Souls' Day with lighting candles and even Bethlehem Christmas market. Religious rituals and ceremonies can also be found in the works of Miro Gregor, Juraj Šajmovič, or Ján Cifra.

The late although still pre-revolution era in Slovak documentary photography is surveyed by two art theorists, Peter Hanák and Aurel Hrabušický. Their conjoint project *Lost time? Slovakia 1969-1989 in documentary photography* embodies the whole visual complex of the chosen period. Throughout the artwork of authors the documenting of religious themes is either complex and programmatic, or only marginal. From this era are known the documentary cycles of Pavol Breier (Christmas 1978, Pilgrims 1971-72), Fero Tomík (Pilgrims 1971, Marriage in Orava 1970-71), Jozef Sedlák (Sisters of the Holy Cross 1983), Ľubo Stach (Parables 1985-87) or Jozef Lauruský (Russian I-II 1985-86). "Tibor Huszár was in the long term devoted to the theme of believers and depiction of the architecture of wooden churches in Slovakia, from which an unique photographic publication Annual rings of eternity ensued." [12]

"Theme of religion has become very popular after the revolution. Profession of faith has been previously affected, faith has been regarded as a kind of obscurantism and newspapers publishing pictures depicting religious gatherings and rituals were prohibited." [13]

"Thanks to the November 1989 the general public saw the projects previously assigned to personal use." [12] This matter of fact had an immediate positive influence on the documentary (even journalistic) photography. Until

that time the artworks marginalized and unacceptable by the regime could finally be published and exhibited. The relief came mainly for the authors who in the long term worked on themes of folk traditions, country life, religious rituals, documented Christian pilgrims or images from believers' lives within particular communities.

Currently, the documentary photography (not only in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, but in the world as well) does not remain in the documentary layer, but finds new relations and interactions in a wider all-social context. "The view, the background, the equipment and photography material, dynamics and with it the emotionality of expression, all of that has changed." [14]

The desire to express yourself in regard to themes that necessitate a new point of view is increasingly emerging. "The analysis of life and its various situations steered the Slovak photography towards sophisticated expressive possibilities." [14] Nowadays, the visual depiction of religious themes makes its way in a similar fashion. It is not solely about documenting the rituals. Contemporary tendencies of the documentary photography in religious context span over various interpretational layers. They present new possibilities of cultural dialogue and a confrontation of a classic value of a photographic document with other interpretations, whereas they pick up on cultural, global and media contexts. "Aside from religious standpoint, the photography of a documenting character clearly absorbs the value category of aesthetics, morality, psychology, sociology, or politics." [15]

## ***5.2. Authorial photographic concepts with religious elements***

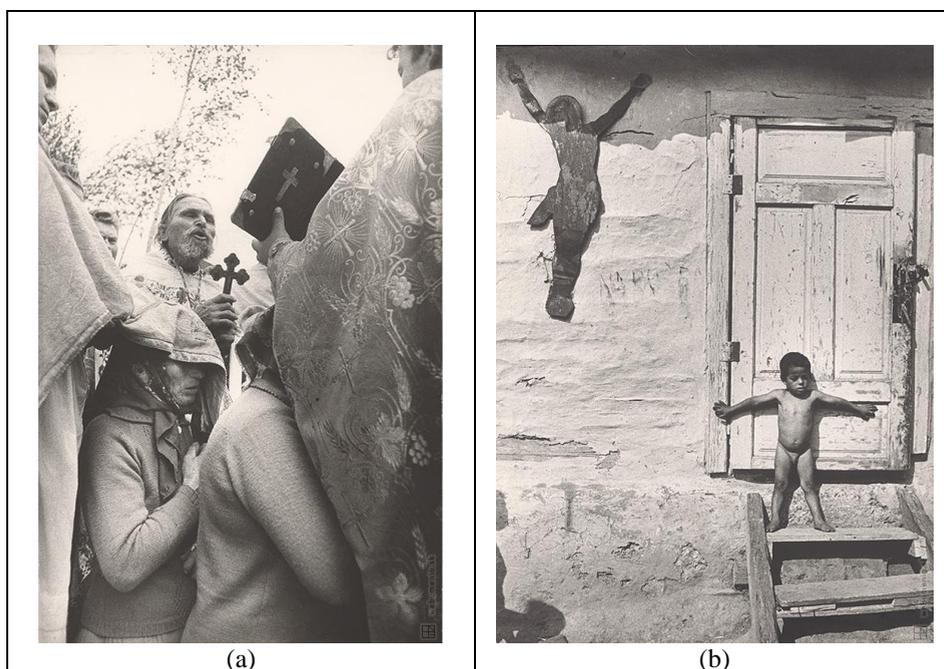
Part of the study is devoted to authorial projects that survey and visually reflect the theme of faith. These are the projects of older and middle generation of authors who in the long run are actively participating on the development of documentary tradition of Slovak photography, Pavol Breier and Jozef Sedlák. The youngest contemporary Slovak documentary photography is represented by Boris Németh with his postmodern approach. In this context, Jindřich Štreit was chosen as a striking figure of the Czech documentary photography.

### ***5.2.1. Pavol Breier - Eastern Slovakia and Orava***

The interconnection of photographic artwork of Pavol Breier with religion can be traced to 1970s. Around that time he began documenting a rural orthodox pilgrim. To the theme of faith he responds with photos from Orava which present the life of local mountaineers and their relationship with faith. Breier's photos with elements of religion are a component of a long executed cycle in the characteristic style of the so-called 'Bresson document'. Similarly to Martinček, Breier depicts the fate of people living outside the culture of cities. They both depict situations and surroundings of religious reality in a strong and interconnected relationship to the country, fields and anonymity of forgotten but proud divine people in the regions of Slovakia. "Martinček's characters rebelled

against, whereas Breier's characters passively accept what was given to them by the tradition, fate, God. From his pictures of Orava emanates the essence of this life - this is our destiny. It does not matter whether the author observes them carting manure or picking up the autumn potato harvest... or drinking liquor during lunch break." [16]

To such fateful Slovak themes of mother land, hard labour, folk traditions undoubtedly belongs strong, steadfast and simple faith in God (the Church), which Breier finds and depicts as something traditional, but at the same time delivering a substantial religious tradition of the mission of Saint Cyril and Methodius in Slovakia. "The photos of the Christian Orthodox religious rituals originated in the Eastern Slovakia. The scenes of pilgrims in the pictures have a singular magic feeling that is intensified by the fact that services were held under open sky. An improvised iconostas was installed on a cloth held by birches. A pope was the central figure of the whole ceremony. Breier sent photos from ceremonies to the Pope who kept inviting him on additional pilgrims and ceremonies." [17] (Figure 1)



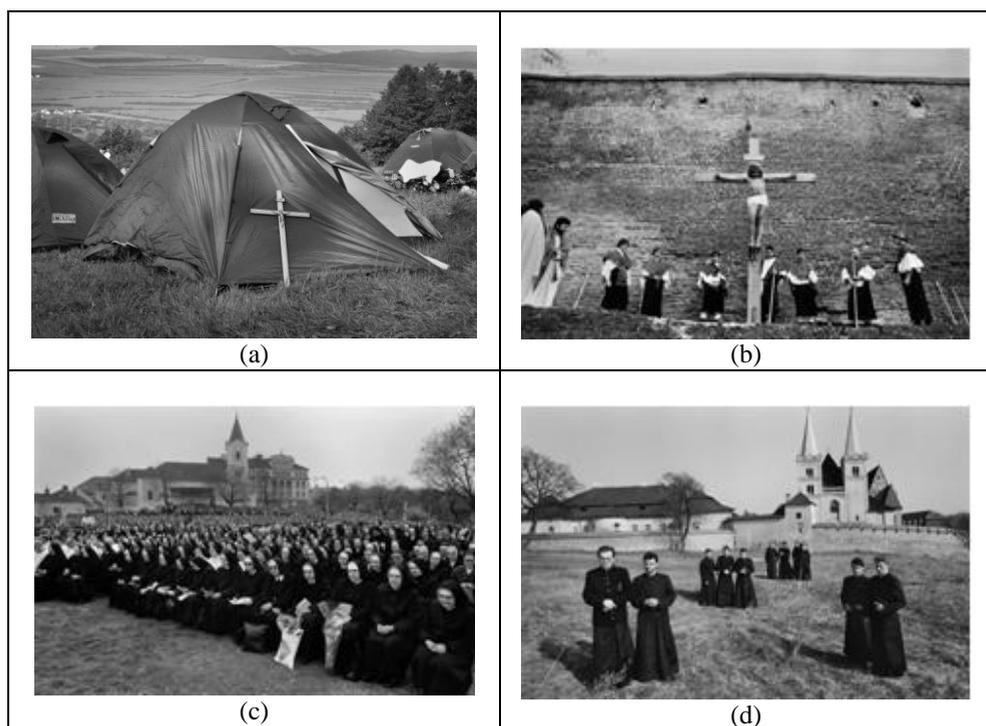
**Figure 1.** Pavol Breier: (a) Uličské Krivé, 1972; (b) Bardejov, 1971.

### 5.2.2. Jozef Sedlák - Celebrations

Jozef Sedlák handles religious themes in a programmatic way. Firstly, in prerevolution years he did so in secret, but openly continued on his projects in the postrevolution era up to now. According to the author, whether it is rituals, pilgrims, spiritual liturgy sessions or religious ceremonies, they have always corresponded and still do with the contexts of strong and traditional living,

which is ethnographically, geopolitically and historically inherent to Slovakia. “When I was documenting these events I always saw a very strong moment of reverence of spiritual living, mystique and in the period before the November 1989 a strong personal and political testimony.” [15]

By the means of visual multiplication in the sequence of a story of eternal promises of sisters in Báč (1995) the author mediates personal resolutions of young girls who symbolically become ‘the brides of Christ’- photos from Pilgrimage to Mount of Levoča (2012) convey new forms of religious identity, living the faith in God more individually and freely (Figure 2a). As the author says himself, “Such interpretation does not reduce the intensity of the relationship, but proposes wider and extensive realism of faith free from formal pathos” [15].



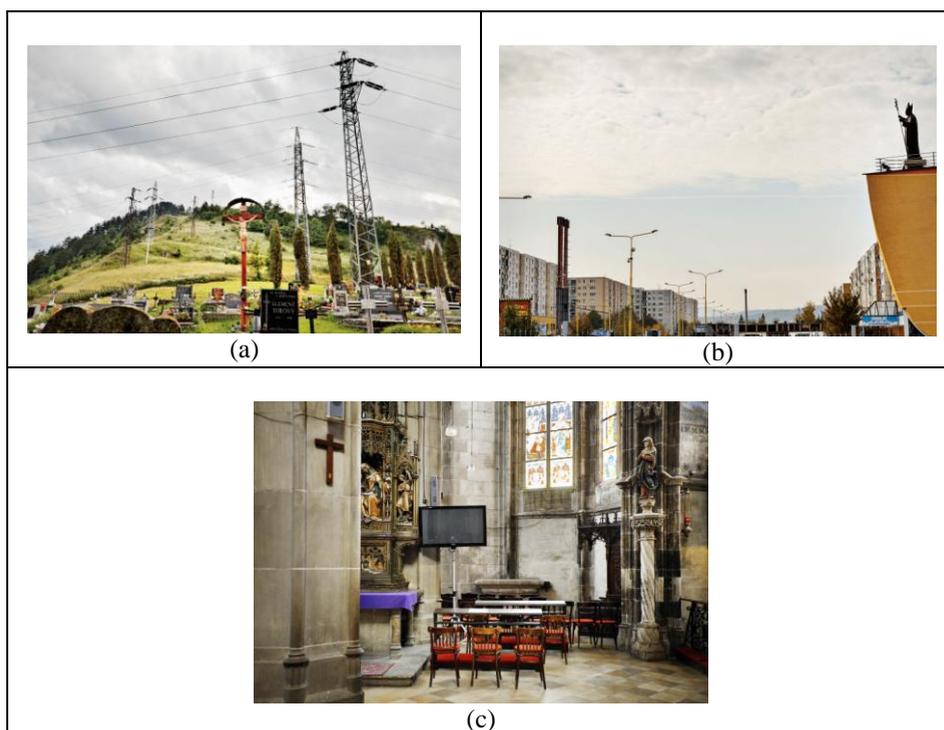
**Figure 2.** Jozef Sedlák: (a) Pilgrimage to Mount of Levoča, 2012; (b) Religious celebrations, Trnava, 1999; (c) Religious celebrations, Nitra, 1994; (d) Religious celebrations, Spišská Kapitula, 1990.

Within his own religious standpoint Jozef Sedlák has been for some time working on the project *Celebrations* (Figure 2b, c and d). He documents the events of a Slovak religious cult (*Calvary* 1998, *A free day of theologians* 1990, *Holy Thursday Celebrations* 1993, *Installation of the Bishop* 1990) in which he presents denominately united community of people out of whom individual stories and living faith in God emanate. Jozef Sedlák’s photos are in a certain

sense a linkage of realities, mystic experience and ontological relevancy to metaphysics.

### 5.2.3. Boris Németh - State of conscience

“In his projects Boris Németh has in the long term been devoted to surveying external and internal changes of the country. Quite naturally, the theme of faith is related with ours.” [18] In the project *State of conscience*, he visually defines space and surroundings and their contemporary changes (Figure 3). Németh’s urban still lifes are dominated by neutral, if not a cold attitude of an uninvolved spectator and are distinguished by overlapping into conceptual document.



**Figure 3.** Boris Németh: (a) Martinček pri Ružomberku, (b) Prešov, (c) Dóm sv. Alžbety.

### 5.2.4. Jindřich Štreit - The Gate of Hope

Jindřich Štreit, a prominent figure of the Czech documentary photography, inserts the spiritual dimension of faith into his artwork. The photography cycle under the name *The Gate of Hope* (Figure 4) which was in production since 1970s up to now, follows the context of the Church in the flow of time. The author mediates a view of changing people, moments of sadness and humour, and as well as perceiving the changes related to pre- and post

revolution era in which a great deal of attention is devoted not only to people - the clergy, but to religious and historical landmarks. On one hand, the author approach the theme of faith with reverence and a feeling of fellowship, on the other hand he has the ability to view the religious contexts in a humorous if almost in absurd way. Štreit's photos capture rituals and pilgrims from various countries and various churches, they survey the cycle of life from birth to death, they point to the first contact with faith, and difficult life situations in which believers turn to God. "For me it is important that the photo has a meaning, a form, but as at the same time it should be thought provoking. For me it is essential that the visitors pause for a while and that the photo hits them in a way so that they can think about it." [Z. Doležalová, *Jindřich Štreit otevřel Bránu naděje*, <http://prerov.nejlepsi-adresa.cz/zpravy/clanky/Jindrich-Streit-otevrel-Branu-nadeje-Po-Madridu-se-vystava-predstavi-i-Prerovanum-13988>, accessed 19.2.2014]

The documentary cycle of Jindřich Štreit *The Gate of Hope* can be perceived as a symbolic denomination of a visual language of faith that is closely tied with every layer of human life, whereas the author leaves an open space for contemplation and free interpretation of his artwork.



**Figure 4.** Jindřich Štreit: (a) Nun in dead-house, Králůvky, 1999; (b) Náklo, 1990.

## 6. Conclusions

By reflecting on the authorial photographic programmes our study *Documentary photographic concepts with religious themes in the region of Slovakia* aimed at pointing out the relationship of sacral theme and its interpretation in art (documentary photography). On the basis of clarifying the theme in wider cultural, global and media contexts, the study compared the presence of religious theme, religious symbolism and iconography, and at the same time it investigated the internal motivational elements of interpretation of faith in selected concepts of Slovak and Czech authors.

From the point of evolution of art (visual theories) the study opened room for various interpretational layers, the relationship of the author to the theme, the

relationship of the spectator to the artwork in question, perception of messages and references for the contemporary society.

The submitted visual records of Christian rituals pointed not only at the matter as to how to characterize and interpret these artworks (as a visual and archive documents) from the point of religion (the Church). At the same time they pointed at the contemporary cultural and social standing of art with religious theme in Slovakia in the space of free speech and competition, without unfavourable ideological pressure that can be traced in historic contexts of this region.

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