
THE LEGACY OF THE GREEK CATHOLIC LEADING PERSONALITIES AND MARTYRS IN SLOVAKIA AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION FOR THE BUILDING UP OF A FREE SLOVAK SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article wishes to consider the particular historical case study of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia in order to show not only how its leading personalities shaped the convictions and piety of their own faith communities but also the potential such example might wield for the continuing efforts to build up a free, democratic society. The courage, self-sacrifice, and unyielding faithfulness of personalities such as Bishop Gojdič and Bishop Hopko caused wrinkles on the face of the totalitarian regime and encouraged hope that not even a demonic evil and excruciating pain can quench the truth and erase human dignity. This witness proved to be one of the foundational building blocks of the later democratic transformation of Slovak society.

Keywords: Greek Catholic Church, Hopko, Gojdič, Eastern Orthodoxy, narrative

1. Introduction

From the perspective of a Christian theological and historical reflection it can be argued that the 20th century was a century of martyrs but also a century of God's victories. Countless people died in the Siberian gulags, in political prisons and forced labour camps, in fake trials, or during desperate attempts to flee from their home country. Those with 'eyes to see' and the courage to speak were silenced so that the society might remain blind and complacent to every whim of the evil regime [1]. Yet, the social forces in Slovakia and beyond, fuelled by economic instability as well as growing dissatisfaction with the oppression of the Communist-led Politburo, brought about gradual changes that few expected or even hoped for. Religious based communities and institutions played a significant role in cultivating both, the discontent with the regime as well as the courage and resolve of the population to stand up to it [2, 3]. (In his study, Valčo argues that current liberal democratic culture in the Euro-American world

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appears to disregard “the power of culture and religion seriously as a major driving force, motivating the wills and the hearts of individuals and communities” [3, p. 134] – which shows itself to be detrimental to preserving the very values liberal capitalist democracies wish to promote.)

In the aftermath of 1989, it was the remaining ethical capital built up by the witness of the martyrs (both religious and secular), among other factors, which prevented Czechoslovakia from turning into chaos of retaliation and vengeance. Thus, it is only appropriate to be intentionally mindful of the lives of those, whose example shaped the socio-ethical fabric of our society in totalitarian times but also in time of political freedom.

Local Christian churches realize the importance (in terms of the level of influence) the select few might play in the shaping up of the moral vision and ethos of a given society. Therefore, they continue to bring valuable case studies into the public discourse. One such example was the ecumenical commemoration of the martyrs that took place on the 7th of May in the year 2000 in Colosseum in Rome, where the pope John Paul II said, among other things: „Where there it seems that hatred humiliates the whole life and there will be no possibility to flee from it, the martyrs of faith pointed out that love is stronger than death. In the midst of horrible systems of oppression that defiled a human being, in the places of pain, hunger and suffering of all types, they showed that they belong to Christ, the crucified and risen Lord... May we always commemorate the living memory of our martyrs - brothers and sisters in the century and millennium that we are just entering. May it be handed down from generation to generation so that it is always a part of deep Christian renewal. Let us guard the memory of the martyrs as the treasure of great value for the Christians of the new millennium!” [4]

This article wishes to consider the particular historical case study of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia in order to show not only how its leading personalities shaped the convictions and piety of their own faith communities but also the potential such example might wield for the continuing efforts to build up a free, democratic society.

2. The Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia: a historical case study

A careful study and analysis of the history of Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia leads us to realization, that its historical experience (including the current expressions of its theological vision and piety) may become a source of wisdom and inspiration, relevant not only to its faithful (every priest and believer), but to all people of good will.

The Greek Catholic Church represents an ‘Oriental Model’ of Christianity and yet, it remains an indissociable part of the Catholic Church. “Its old theological, liturgical and austere traditions, its ceremonies, originality and mentality are Oriental or Byzantine, but its relationships and membership are Western or Roman. It lives in the Oriental model like the Eastern Orthodox, but it is united with Rome. ... The Greek Catholic Church provides clear evidence

that it is possible to keep one's own particularity without damaging unity. ... The Greek Catholic Church provides a vivid picture of the ancient apostolic tradition and the eastern practice, and simultaneously the western way of thinking. By this, it creates a Christian symbiosis. It displays a possible way for the whole Christian Church and for the non-Christian world." [5] This unique experience of symbiosis and unity in diversity is becoming ever more relevant in the increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious situation of our societies.

Not every local Church had endured as much affliction as the Greek Catholics in Slovakia; on the other hand, not every local Church can boast with such high number of confessors [1, p. 455]. In spite of difficult trials which this Church had to go through in the 20th century, it remained faithful to God. Starting in the 19th century when the Prešov diocese was established, this Church had to find its own place in multi-national Austrian-Hungarian Empire, in the society of the first Czechoslovak Republic and also between two world wars.

The Greek Catholic priests were considered promoters of 'panslavism' – i.e. dangerous political heretics who promoted the cultural and political unity of the Slavic ethnic groups, under the leadership of the mighty Russian nation (seen as the future liberator). Thus, they had to endure discrimination, internment camps, and various types of persecution already in the time of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire [6]. After WWI the Church had to face several pressing challenges: "mutual alienation of the faithful and their clergy; persisting Magyarization attitude of the clergy in the Greek Catholic Church, difficult social and economic status of Greek Catholic clergy and believers, and spiritual emigration of believers and clergy; spreading of anticlerical and anti-religious movements in Czechoslovakia, the expansion of the Orthodox Greek Catholic movement among population of eastern Slovakia" [5, p. 274].

The oppression and suffering continued during WWII but the biggest disaster came after the war. The early attacks upon the Greek Catholic Church were on the rise, culminating on the 19th of July 1948 in secret police raids and a comprehensive inspection of the Greek Catholic male and female monasteries by the National Security (NS) agents. Needless to say, matters of national security were firmly in the Czechoslovak Communist Party's hands. "Forasmuch as all above mentioned monasteries were disturbed by militant NS during the inspection, the system of services was also interrupted, and such inspections were made only in our Greek Catholic monasteries. In consequence of this, the inspections have created a scandal and indignation in the whole diocese and mistrust of the faithful towards NS..." [P. Gojdič, *List biskupa Gojdiča prezidentovi rep. zo dňa 24.7.1948*, Slovak National Archive – PV – 'Top Secret Files', Inventory No. 119, File No. 189, Bratislava, p. 1] Political bullying continued by accusing the Greek Catholic (but also the Roman Catholic) priests and bishop of being 'Vatican Agents', or even 'murderers of [the Slovak] nation' by the communist controlled press. Direct accusations of acts of treason and other severe violations of the Czechoslovak constitution meant that even the highest government and political leaders of our nation gradually began to openly engage in this discrediting campaign. Here it is important to note that the

suspicion and hateful resentment on the side of Czechoslovak communist had its roots in the Soviet Union where the Greek Catholic Church was meticulously liquidated as a dangerous 'western element' with ties to western imperialists and the Roman papacy [7].

The communist leaders soon wanted to use the momentum and strike decisive death blows. When the situation seemed ripe, the government shut down Catholic (both Roman and Greek) male monasteries and deported all male members of the orders to internment camps. This so-called *Action 'K'* happened on the night from 13th to 14th of April 1950. The subsequent 'Sobor of Prešov' (also known as 'Great Sobor'; the term 'sobor' denotes a Greek Catholic 'Synodical Convention') declared the official integration of the Greek Catholic Church into the Eastern Orthodox Church. With monasteries destroyed, action against all remaining female convents and religious houses soon followed under the secret designation '*Action R*' (August 29-31, 1950) [8]. Over 300 000 Greek-Catholic parishioners were forced to become members of the Eastern Orthodox Church. (The Russian Orthodox Church in Slovakia had a newly founded bishopric with its seat in Prešov, and a new bishop, Alexander Dechtereov. It had 30 ecclesiastic parishes, 15 with established priest stations, and 17 priests for Slovakia. The number of the faithful was estimated at 30,000. Altogether, there were 17 churches in Slovakia. [G. Husák, *Správa pre predsedu KSS o cirkevných otázkach. Ref. G. Husák (Religious issues report to the Secretary of the Communist Party, Ref. G. Husák)*, Slovak National Archive, Archival signature: ÚV KSS-O.1950-F.3.2.1950-P, p. 2]) The climax of the persecution was a procedure against the bishops: Mons. Pavol Gojdič and later on Mons. Vasil' Hopko. All in all, 122 Greek Catholic priests were killed in the persecution between 1950 and 1968 [9].

In spite of severe persecution, only very few Greek Catholic priests gave in to the pressure and became Eastern Orthodox priests [9, p. 8]. Most of the leading personalities in the Church who refused to switch to Orthodoxy were arrested and either sent to prisons or to labour camps. Other Greek Catholic clergy were together with their families forcefully deported to western Czech boundary lands, being strictly forbidden to perform any religious ceremonies. Needless to say, a significant number of them did not comply. Their parishioners helped them perform religious acts secretly, hiding former Greek-Catholic priests and risking thereby their own freedom and wellbeing.

In a regime that officially declared religious freedom, such direct anti-religious actions had to be ideologically coloured and presented in order to give a legitimate appearance to it. Thus, the Liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was justified by a made-up desire of the public masses to join with the Church which represents brotherly Russia, and to break away from the "Vatican and Western imperialists" [10]. Even though this 'charade' was not politically convincing, and even less morally justified, the culture of fear intentionally cultivated during the Stalinist era in all Eastern Bloc countries managed to stifle practically all open opposition (with few exceptions). Therefore, it wasn't until the year 1968 – the short era of 'Prague Spring' in

Czechoslovakia – that the Greek Catholic Church was reinstated as a legal institutional entity. The first ecclesiastical steps were taken on the 10th of April, 1968, at the ‘Sobor of Košice’. The ‘Sobor of Prešov’ was declared illegal. Finally, on the 13th of June 1968, the Greek Catholic Church was officially recognized by the government and allowed to exist, though no restitutions took place at this time. Unfortunately, the Prague Spring with its hope for renewal and a thawing of the regime came to an abrupt end in the August invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies. Though the decision to reinstate the Greek Catholic Church was upheld by the new communist government, the era of the so-called ‘normalization’ was harsh on the Church, barely allowing its survival.

The Greek Catholic bishop Pavol Peter Gojdič [11] was the Church leader during most of this tumultuous time. (Pavol Peter Gojdič was born on 17th July 1888 in Ruske Peľanovce, in the family of a Greek Catholic priest. He studied Theology in Prešov and Budapest in the period of 1907–1911. On 27th August, 1911 Gojdič was ordained into Greek Catholic priesthood in Prešov. He undertook several functions in the episcopal curia, from officer to director of the episcopal office. On 20th July, 1922, he entered the monastery Monks Basilian on Černeča hill near Mukačevo. He was appointed apostolic administrator of the eparchy of Prešov on 14th September 1926. In the same year, on 28th November, he took eternal vows in the monastic society of Saint Basil the Great and on 25th March, 1937, he was consecrated bishop in Saint Climent’s Basilica in Rome.) On 17th July, 1940, he was appointed residential bishop of Prešov. Living a holy life, Gojdič was perceived as a threat to the totalitarian regime, both in the era of Fascism and Communism. He could not be extorted or blackmailed and his faithfulness could not be diminished by threats. Gojdič lifted the life of the Church and especially the Prešov Eparchy up to a new level. As bishop, he worked eagerly for the spiritual elevation of the clergy and believers. His activities in the social, spiritual, and educational fields had a significant impact on the life of the church and adjacent communities. Bishop Gojdič expended enormous effort in the social sphere [11] because of his conviction that the role of the Church is not just celebrating the Liturgy and proclaiming God’s word. He understood the role of the Church to include taking care of temporary needs of the believers as well as all human kind. Under his leadership the Church put to practice many activities [12] according to the example of Jesus Christ. The effects of some of Gojdič’s activities are still visible today. When needed, he stood on the side of justice to defend the oppressed and persecuted people, mainly Jews. Bishop Gojdič personally rescued a large number of people, issuing permissions to baptism for a few dozens of Jews, many of which live till this day in Israel, Canada, Germany or Slovakia [13]. His heroic attitudes as well as his leadership skills put into practice among the Greek Catholic clergy made a lasting memory in the hearts of many rescued people, constituting the substance for a captivating message for the following generations [14].

In 1950, after the infamous events of the so-called ‘Sobor Prešov’ had taken place, his internment and imprisonment in Czechoslovakia began. On 15th January, 1951, he was condemned by the National Court to life imprisonment,

including loss of civil rights and seizure of property. Having had endured extreme psychological and physical torture, he died as a martyr of the Church on 17th July, 1960, in the Leopoldov prison. However, his legacy lives on, magnified by the fact that he was beatified by pope John Paul II, on 4th November, 2001 in Rome.

Bishop Vasiľ Hopko was ordained a priest by Bishop Gojdič on February 3, 1929. His first place of work was a Prague parish until 1936. In that year, bishop Gojdič called him to Prešov, where he became the student pastor of the local Catholic seminary. In 1937, he worked as a consistorial consultant. After Hopko had completed his doctorate of theology, bishop Gojdič chose him to be his secretary, and then made him assistant to the bishop. At the same time, Hopko gave lectures on ethics in the Higher school of theology in Prešov. On November 9th 1946, the Holy See made him auxiliary bishop of Prešov and on January 2nd 1947 he was appointed and consecrated (on May 11th 1947) to his office by bishop Gojdič.

Auxiliary bishop Hopko became the right hand of the bishop in residence, Pavol Peter Gojdič. During visitations in parishes, he encouraged the faithful in their allegiance to the faith, to diligent performance of religious duties, and to love and faithfulness to the Church [10]. Hopko enjoyed a high level of trust not only among his Church members but initially (until 1947) also from the Czechoslovak government. This can be more concretely seen in the letter from the Ministry of Education in Prague: “Dr. Hopko is from a political and national perspective fully reliable, generally popular and he enjoys the best reputation not only in religious circles but also secular” [Ministerstvo školstva a osvety v Prahe, *List povereníka zo dňa 6. marca Ministerstvu školstva a osvety (The letter of charge person from March 6, 1947, to Ministry for education)*, Subject number: B. 13324/47 1, from January 24, 1947, Praha]. After the ‘Sobor of Prešov’ on the 28th of April 1950, he was arrested and sentenced to a 15-year imprisonment. In 1964, his sentence was discontinued because of his deteriorating health, the result of cruel torture in prison. One exemplary account of Hopko’s suffering suffices to get an idea of the dire circumstances of political prisoners. Recollecting his experience from the prison in Prague, Hopko states: “In order to ‘break me’, they locked me up in a dark solitary cell where I completely lost orientation. Then they forced me to walk almost without stop for nearly 122 days. During these days I received only a piece of bread and a glass of water. My swollen legs looked like tree trunks. In my mind I saw my own funeral. But I prayed to be strong and remain faithful to the Catholic Church.” [10] Upon reflecting on his experience in prison, he finally says: “I had to bear heavy suffering that I would not even wish on my greatest enemies” [10].

Upon his release from prison in 1964, Hopko was temporarily placed in the monastery at Czech Osek. In 1968, he was definitively released. On 2nd April 1969, Pope Paul VI appointed him Auxiliary bishop of Prešov, an office he held until his death on the 23rd of July 1976.

3. Past witness in contemporary context

The present socio-cultural milieu in all post-totalitarian countries exhibits common traits of nostalgia for the past and frustration by the present. There are strong nostalgic memories, especially among the older population in Slovakia, about the ‘good, old times’ when ‘bread was cheap and jobs were certain’. Few among this generation of people, however, remember the torture chambers, the gulags, the forced labour in the uranium mines or the Siberian gulags. Few of them remember how it was to be shut behind an ‘Iron Curtain’, unable to freely travel, unable to speak one’s own mind, or even to think freely. The collective memory of a nation relies partly on the continuing witness of the Church communities – its servants, preachers, and martyrs (past and present). The Greek Catholic Church, with its powerful story of humble beginnings, survival in spite of the odds during the time of ‘great suffering’ in the 1950’s, and its revitalization since 1990, can play and has played a constructive role in cultivating our nation’s identity through memory and tangible practice of piety.

Then there is a growing sense of frustration, no longer limited to only the ‘grandparents’, who lived and worked in the old regime. The Western civilization in general seems to be wavering on the brink of a pleasure-worshipping nihilism. A creeping entropy of certainties concerns no longer just the economic sphere but increasingly devours the sphere of culture, values and relationships. The suspicion toward all grand, meta-narratives on the side of intellectual and political elites has given rise to a fragmented world, filled with chaotic allegiances and disordered desires [15-17]. The recent rise of political and religious fundamentalism (on the right and on the left) is a daunting witness to a high level of dissatisfaction in the populace. The feelings of helplessness are currently being magnified by the growing immigration crises in Europe. There still remains a sense (or rather a hope) that, under certain conditions, a multi-cultural and multi-religious Europe can be stronger – but one of the essential conditions is the purposeful cultivation of a dialogue of cultural/religious traditions. However, such dialogue is only possible, if all parties involved understand and, to a significant extent, embrace their own tradition as their own, reasoned vision of life and lived ethos. The critical question is: Does the Western civilization, and more specifically, does our Slovak society understand and does it critically embrace its cultural and religious tradition? There is a growing apprehension in many European Christian communities that the initially gradual de-sacralisation of our societies has succumbed to the forces of ideological secularism. Cut off from its religious roots, such culture will not be a potent counterpart and dialogical partner with immigrants whose identities are deeply rooted in their religious practices and convictions. (As Giovanni Reale points out: „An individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning” [18].)

More importantly, such culture will lose its sense of direction and moral purpose and plunge once again into an ideological frenzy in which human dignity becomes ultimately a useless concept (or a temporary, transient idea used instrumentally to attain a higher political goal) [19]. “A society that ignores these issues and dilutes its vision of human social living to a socio-economic political construct crafted by skilful social engineers will have to suffer the detrimental effects of desocialization.” [20] Disrupted social ties are an inevitable result of false anthropological presuppositions. “A flattened conception of human being”, therefore, “leads to a flattened, shallow vision of life, finally resulting in profoundly discontented individuals who are unable to socialize in meaningful, long-lasting, and deeply satisfying ways.” [20, p. 275-276]

Here, again, the liturgical-communal and personal witness of the Greek Catholic Church may serve as a helpful antidote (though, of course, not the only one) against the processes of desocialization. It has both the potential and the credentials, due to its historical struggles and unswerving faithfulness, to convincingly argue that human moral and spiritual values: (1) “are integral parts of human communities”; (2) that they are “necessarily (by definition) socially embodied, not individually based”; (3) that each human individual has his/her personal story which arises “out of tangible, historically embodied narratives (as living traditions) which themselves are dynamic, evolving narratives, influencing others and being influenced by others” [21]; and that, therefore, our whole society should intentionally look for (or at least respect and protect) the kind of ‘embodied narratives’ that have shown their potential in motivating people to selfless, pro-social behaviour. Together with other strands of Christian Tradition, the Greek Catholic Church will argue that “[t]he meaning of life cannot be truly understood apart from narrative ethics’ interpretation of the doctrine of creation and redemption” in which the human subject [22-25] “is anchored horizontally (in the social fabric of his community) and vertically (in the transcendent and yet fiercely immanent narrative of divine self-revelation in the acts of creation, redemption, and sanctification)” [21], as also our divine liturgy portrays and conveys. In it we are constantly reminded and, in turn, we proclaim it to the world, that “our world — the visible and invisible realities of what we call our Universe — is a deliberate unfolding of a grand narrative that starts before the emergence of space and time and continues beyond its physical limits” [20]. Our historically embodied Christian Tradition maintains that “the created world — all the created realities with their rich expressions of life and beauty including (but not limited to) human beings — derive their dignity and value from the fact that the stories of their lives are parts of a great creation symphony, willed by a loving, just, and powerful Creator” [20, p. 271]. This is what the Greek Catholic bishops, Pavol P. Gojdič and Vasil’ Hopko, believed; this is precisely the force, the constitutive narrative that gave them their identity and helped them stay faithful vis-à-vis unimaginable atrocities. They are shining and historically accessible examples for the shaping of our moral vision and determination.

4. Conclusions

In our increasingly globalized and yet ever more fragmented world of diverse cultures and interests, human societies will continue urgently to look for templates of socially cohesive living. During its relatively short but uniquely rich historic experience, the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia has learned valuable lessons in this respect, proving that a ‘symbiosis’ of apparently diverse traditions is not only a challenge that can be overcome but also a gift to be celebrated and shared. It is this ‘symbiosis’, this experience of unity in diversity (or despite diversity) that provides a unique opportunity for religious and secular intellectuals to draw inspiration and resolve for their efforts to build up a free, just, peaceful, and cohesive society.

It is easy to succumb to the latent totalitarian power of consumerism if one assumes the current ‘normative’ conviction of the ‘non-existence’ of an all-encompassing narrative framework that is inherent to this world. Our world, our local communities may have come to believe that the world has lost its story (narrative). If this is truly the case, then our task becomes ever more urgent: “If we truly live in a world that is losing its story, then Christians as ‘people of the Book’ who receive their identity from the grandest narrative ever written, are obliged to think about how to re-establish a sense of narrative identity of our reality. Those following the narrative of the Book (the Bible) wish to stress the importance of narrative for the shaping of a vision of life; for the motivation of individuals and groups of people; as well as for the cultivation of values.” [20, p. 272] Therefore, we join Robert Jenson’s invitation to think pro-actively (as a church): “[I]f the Church does not find her hearers antecedently inhabiting a narratable world, then the Church must herself be that world (...) within which life could be lived with dramatic coherence. (...) For the ancient Church, the walls of the place of Eucharist, whether these were the walls of a basement or of Hagia Sophia or of an imaginary circle in the desert, enclosed a world. And the great drama of the Eucharist was the narrative life of that world.” [R. Jenson, *How the World Lost Its Story*, First Things, October 1993, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/10/002-how-the-world-lost-its-story>, accessed 15 December 2015]

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