Watersource from the Rock

Slovak Jesuits' Testimony of Faith in the Times of Communist Persecution

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Ladislav Csontos SJ

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Slovak Jesuits' Testimony of Faith in the Times of Communist Persecution

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Motto:

The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." (Exodus 17:5-6)

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Foreword

The intention of the Ignatian Year 2021–2022 is to remind believers of the gift of spiritual exercises for the whole Church. As the Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Arturo Sosa, wrote in his letter to all members of the Society of Jesus on 27 September 2019, the 400th anniversary of the canonisation of St. Ignatius in 1622 would be at the centre of the Ignatian Jubilee Year. The beginning of the Ignatian Jubilee coincides with the 500th anniversary of Ignatius's (Iñigo's) injury by a cannonball in the legs while defending Pamplona, Spain, on 20 May 1521, the event that started his internal rebirth. The jubilee year will end on the feast of St. Ignatius on 31 July 2022.

The mysterious action of God's grace caused a wounded ambitious nobleman and military officer to become a penitent, mystic, spiritual guide, zealous evangelist, founder of a religious community and later the first Superior General of the order. The decisive role in this process was played by his mystical experience in Manresa, where his *Spiritual Exercises*, which emerged from his personal experience, soon becoming the spiritual cornerstone of the Society of Jesus. Ignatius shared his spiritual experience with believers who desired to do live their life of faith more intensely than the average Christian. On the basis of their own experience, they reached a point of conversion and radical change of life that surprised the people in their vicinity.

Since the foundation of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits have spread throughout the whole world, living and working in various, even the most difficult conditions. The times of communist perse-

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cution of the Catholic Church in Slovakia, representing a particularly cruel chapter in Slovak history, brought about the suppression of religious orders and, for many consecrated persons, including the spiritual sons of St. Ignatius, imprisonment and brutal torture. Despite the physical and psychological violence they were long exposed to, they have endured trials, maintained their faith, and borne the fruit of the apostolate wherever God placed them. In civilian occupations as manual workers or as prisoners interned along with criminals and murderers, they secretly translated theological literature and provided it in samizdat (secretly self-published) form to diocesan priests and lay people. If we ask how it is possible that they persevered in such severe trials, giving the ultimate witness of the faith, we can give a clear answer: they were caught up in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. They held them every year, under any circumstances, even in prison, where they also gave them to others. Although busy with their secular jobs, they did not neglect a single opportunity to convey the experience of spiritual exercises to high school students, university students and the young intelligentsia.

The book you are holding in your hands offers a brief outline of the life and work of ten Slovak Jesuits, witnesses of the faith from the times of communist persecution. It contains a short study on each of them and a sample of their writings reflecting the spirit of St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. It is intended to be a contribution to the apostolic work of sharing the founding experience on the basis of which the apostolic body of the Society of Jesus partakes in the mission to unite all things in Christ.

Fr. Jozef Šofranko SJ, provincial

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Preface

More than thirty years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Socialist Bloc in Central and Eastern Europe. A number of new, free states have emerged and embarked on the democratic path, guaranteeing their citizens basic human rights and freedoms, including religious freedom, which was systematically suppressed by the previous regimes. The persecution of Christians and believers in general in the region was a direct consequence of the expansion of Soviet influence after World War II. The communist parties in the states of this region, more or less directly supported by the Soviet Union, gradually seized power and began to exercise government in the form of the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the dictatorship of the Communist Party. Formally, elections were still held, but only political entities and candidates approved by the Communist Party could run in them. Although there were governments with their ministers, they were in fact subordinated to the Communist Party's Central Committee. They were its members, or even senior officials. Following the Soviet model and with the massive support of instructors from the Soviet secret police, or the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), whose successor institution became in 1954 the KGB (Committee for State Security), Soviet vassal states built their own secret police forces. The secret police, called State Security (Štb), also operated in Czechoslovakia. This organisation was run by the Communist Party and represented one of its most effective instruments of state control. State Security would enforce the communist political programme through internal terror. No one was sure of their own per-

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sonal freedom, property and life. State Security fought against the so-called internal enemy, including not only wealthy businessmen and landowners, but also farmers and tradesmen, high representatives of the churches, and even the members and high rank officials of the Communist Party itself. The secret police ensured the Communist Party complete hegemony in the state.

The Catholic Church in Slovakia, due to its close connection with the Holy See and traditional devotion to the Holy Father, remained unsubdued. The regime tried hard to break this resistance by massive persecution of Christians. At a rapid pace, all religious schools were nationalised and the Catholic press, publishing houses and associations were abolished. In 1949, an attempted was made to establish a national "Catholic Action", which was, however, rejected as schismatic by Pope Pius XII, who imposed excommunication on its protagonists. This state-directed initiative was openly rejected by all Slovak bishops as well as the vast majority of priests and believers. This attempt to subdue Slovak Church failed. As a response, a series of brutal steps followed. The regime forcibly suppressed all male orders and was about to do the same with the female orders, but for the first time it encountered an insurmountable obstacle: the fact that this action would totally paralyse the public healthcare system, which would suddenly lack six thousand qualified nurses. Diocesan seminaries were closed and in their place only one central seminary, located in Bratislava and controlled by the state, was established. This measure reduced the number of candidates for priesthood by 90 percent. In 1950, the Greek Catholic Church as a whole was abolished, i.e. outlawed, and preparations for the establishment of a national church separated from Rome were set in motion, but again, this attempt also failed. After the series of failures, the state unleashed open persecution of the Catholic Church with the aim of its complete suppression. The bishops and superiors of religious orders were arrested and made the villains in staged show trials. In addition,

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the regime sowed discord among bishops and priests by establishing the so-called Peace Movement of the Catholic Clergy, helped by collaborating priests who were appointed to ministerial posts. They were presented as representatives of the Church, while bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay believers who remained faithful to the Catholic Church and tried to live their faith to the full were monitored, arrested, tortured, put on trial, imprisoned and further monitored by the secret police even after release from prison. In addition, representatives of the Peace Movement of the Catholic Clergy published articles in the state-controlled Catholic newspaper praising the achievements of the People's Democratic Establishment.

Thousands of believers were literally bleeding for their faith under communist tyranny, including diocesan priests and consecrated persons, among them our brothers from the Slovak Jesuit province. In the first place, this was the provincial superior Fr. Ján Srna. He performed this service from 1946 to 1977, for which he was interned and imprisoned. Already before the police intervention against the monasteries and religious houses he decided that even in radically changed external conditions it would be necessary to go on living the consecrated life with unchanged fidelity. Even when he was prevented from performing his service due to restriction of his personal liberty, the organisational continuity of the province was fully maintained thanks to Fr. Matej Marko – his deputy with the full powers of the provincial – who, due to his health condition, had to undergo long-term hospitalisation, which enabled him to meet the confrères and encourage them to persevere in their vocation. He coordinated the secret priestly ordinations of young Jesuits and eventually, after mature consideration, chose Pavol Hnilica, having him ordained a bishop. Hnilica subsequently ordained Bishop Ján Korec. As a result, Fr. Marko was arrested and convicted for secretly maintaining and organising consecrated life. Even after his release from prison he was further monitored and exposed to mental tor-

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ture. In many ways, his work among young, consecrated men and candidates for the priesthood was taken over by Ján Chryzostom Korec, who was secretly ordained a bishop and detained in 1960 and then unjustly convicted. The testimony of Fr. Andrej Osvald, who performed the service of the provincial from 1977 to 1990, confirms that the Jesuits in Slovakia strived to live the fullness of consecrated life. Fr. Osvald, who had experience with imprisonment and secret studies in the 1950s, was well prepared for organising the secret formation of young Jesuits. The fruitfulness of his work fully manifested itself after the fall of communism, when all the structures of the province could be restored.

The testimony of these four men is made complete by the testimony of another six Jesuits who were imprisoned in the 1950s and 1960s. Fr. Valér Zavarský was convicted in particular for mediating free contact with the General Curia in Rome through his acquaintances at the Austrian Consulate, which was qualified as espionage and high treason. As a professor of dogmatic theology in concentration monasteries in Slovakia and Bohemia, Fr. Alojz Litva devoted himself to the secret formation of young Jesuits, thirty-seven of whom were prepared by him for priestly ordination. He spent the period from 1950 to 1968 in internment and prison. He was released on amnesty in May 1968. Fr. Fantišek Paňák was one of the first Jesuits imprisoned. In his case, the reason was giving spiritual exercises to lay people and religious sisters without the socalled state consent and illegal pastoral care of academic youth. At the onset of the persecution, Fr. Pavol Horský belonged to a young generation of Jesuits. He was secretly ordained a priest and imprisoned for secretly studying theology and, specifically, for obtaining a false ID card for Bishop Pavel Hnilica so that he could escape arrest by State Security. Before the beginning of communist persecution, Fr. Ján Dieška was preparing himself to work in Russia through his studies at the Collegium Russicum in Rome; therefore, the secret police had a special interest in him. He escaped from the

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concentration monastery in Podolínec and afterwards remained in hiding in Ružomberok, where he devoted himself to the translation of theological literature and secret pastoral care. In 1953, after his shelter was revealed, he was sentenced to eleven years in prison. Later, even with poor health, he devoted himself to theology and assisted in the secret formation of the Jesuits. Finally, we come to Fr. Emil Krapka, one of the secretly ordained Jesuits who completed their preparations for the priesthood in the concentration monastery in Podolínec. He was secretly ordained as early as in 1950, and in the 1950s, together with Bishop Ján Chryzostom Korec, he devoted himself to young candidates for the priesthood, guiding them in their studies. He was arrested and convicted together with Korec. After 1968, he became the leading figure in the secret education of consecrated persons in Slovakia. These ten personalities form a single whole revealing the strength of the weak and the weakness of the strong. Not even the mighty machinery of the communist regime could destroy the greatness of the faith of these men. They bore true witness to the faith, much like the English martyrs who did not wait for better times but preached the gospel even in changed times.

As for the structure of this work, we first briefly introduce the reader to the context of the persecution of the Catholic Church in Slovakia, with special focus on the Jesuits. This introductory study will be followed by ten studies on the above-mentioned personalities, each of which ends with an attached sample of their preserved writings characterising their personality through their own literary work. Finally, we'll try to summarise their legacy. The effort of the communist persecution was to throw a heavy stone on the Catholic Church that would crush her and make it utterly impossible for her to rise again. Yet, by the work of God's grace, a spring of deepened faith gushed out of this rock, just as when Moses struck a rock in the wilderness of Sin and a spring of water came out of it. The streams of faith of innumerable persecuted Christians, including

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PREFACE

those of our confrères, met together and forming a mighty life-giving river that eventually brought to Slovakia not only religious but also civil freedom and respect for human rights and liberties.

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Jesuits in the context of persecution of the Catholic Church in Slovakia

The political situation in the Czechoslovak Republic that fell into the zone of Soviet influence gradually led to the seizure of power by the Communist Party, an extended arm of the Soviet Union. The Communist Party gradually seized key positions in the police, army and workers' organisations. Although the Democratic Party, integrating within itself various non-communist currents of the political spectrum, convincingly won the last Slovak free elections held on 26 May 1946, it had no impact on the subsequent political development of the state. The February coup that culminated on 25 February 1948 marked the transition of Czechoslovakia from a fragile post-war democracy to a totalitarian system of one political party. On 9 May 1948, a new constitution was adopted establishing the People's Democratic Republic and securing the leading role of the Communist Party in the state. Act No. 231/48 of 16 October 1948 introduced the concept of class enemy into legal system and legalised the practice of class struggle. Article no. 28, speaking of the abuse of religious office, clearly implied who would be the principal class enemy.1

"As early as in June 1948 an important meeting of representatives of the Government on ecclesiastical policy was held in Karlovy

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¹ Cf. VAŠKO, V.: Neumlčená II. Kronika katolické církve v Československu po druhé světové válce. Praha: Zvon, 1990, p. 50.

Conclusion

The lives of the ten Slovak Jesuits described in this book began to unfold in relatively free times, but the advent of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 threw them in the middle of a cruel persecution of the Catholic Church and the faith in general. The regime decided to suppress the Church and its institutions, doing so in a systematic way. Its intervention against the religious, including the Jesuits, took the form of forcible dissolution of monasteries and religious houses on the night of 13 April 1950, concentrating them in internment monasteries with a prison regime. Subsequently, they spent many years in labour camps and prisons, unjustly convicted of continuing their religious life and studying theology while carrying out full-time civilian jobs. As we have stated, the secret police permanently monitored them, and after their arrest they were physically and mentally tortured. However, their torturers made sure they did not die of the torture, for they were afraid of making them martyrs who gave the highest witness to the faith, which as they knew very well, is the seed of new Christians. They were doing everything possible to break their victims, forcing them to sign confessions to deeds they had never committed. They were contained in interrogation protocols, prepared in advance, that the investigators forced upon the interrogated. At the main hearing, Fr Valér Zavarský said that he had hallucinations during the interrogations; Fr Matej Marko was interrogated for several nights in a row, not being allowed to sleep during the day. As a matter of fact, all of them were tortured "to death", i.e. to physical and mental breakdown, without being physically killed. They were

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under constant stress. Even after their release from prison, they were constantly monitored by the secret police, especially Fr. Ján Srna and Bishop Ján Chryzostom Korec, who received dozens of summons for so-called explanations, which in fact was a method of psychological coercion and persecution. They came out of prison in poor health. No wonder, after all, since even Frs. Pavol Horský and Matej Marko, who were not conscripted for the sake of tuberculosis, were sent to the most dreaded prisons and forced to work in mines and life-threatening conditions.

Despite this inhuman treatment, they never harboured hatred for their torturers. They were aware that the Lord God had accepted their prayer of self-giving - Sume Domine et suscipe: "Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O lord, I return it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me. Amen." Frs. Ján Srna, Ján Dieška and Andrej Osvald were beautiful examples of this dedication both in their life and dying. They all instilled in their hearts the words of Fr. Alojz Litva's exhortation they heard in the concentration monastery in Podolínec: "Therefore, now as God has given us the grace to be members of the Church nailed to the cross, nay, the very cells of the exposed tissue inside the wounds of the Mystical Body of Christ, let us soothe our pain by looking at the greatness of the suffering Church. Let us keep in mind that our hardships offer us a unique opportunity for the deeper living of baptism as an immersion in the passion of Christ and strengthening our love for the Bride of Christ, which becomes purer and deeper through this cleansing bath in the blood of Christ, shed through persecution. No doubt it is worth suffering, sacrificing freedom, suffering derision, bullying, troubles and fear that we may not enjoy freedom in our lifetime anymore. It is worth suffering – patiently, voluntarily and with love, offering our hardships as a sacrifice to God. When we talk about patient en-

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durance in adversity, we also mean patience with the source of this adversity, that is, with our persecutors. We need to pray for them, showing them love." Neither Bishop Korec nor Fr. Emil Krapka have ever harboured hatred for their tormentors. Naturally, they did not like to talk about these things. As Fr. Ján Dieška put it, some things remain a secret kept between him and the Lord God only.

Those who were well acquainted with them bore witness to the holiness of their lives. Priests and nuns in Košice characterised Fr. František Paňák as a man quite devoted to God, encouraging the dejected and those who were losing hope, and all the time full of joy. Two native sisters, Justína and Mária Križanová, said about Fr. Ján Dieška that they had lived with a saint. Despite having undergone cruel imprisonment and torture, they came out with reinforced faith, enabling them to strengthen the faith of others by means of their hidden apostolate. Many priests did not even know that it was thanks to them that they had at their disposal samizdat translations of quality foreign theological literature, texts for spiritual exercises and priestly retreats, as well as the works that familiarised them with the fruits of the Second Vatican Council.

The "main characters" of this book built and shaped a system of secret study of philosophy and theology in the spirit of the Council, not limiting themselves to the academic sphere only. Through their abundant and profound sermons, Frs. Valér Zavarský, Pavol Horský and Emil Krapka wrote the most beautiful theological works – the icons of Christ's face imprinted on human hearts. These men remained faithful to their initial self-offering:

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me.

They gave him everything – their whole life and all their abilities – even in difficult times of persecution. Now they are in full

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communion with him, glorified by the Church Triumphant, while we are faced with the task of getting for them due respect from the Church Militant, too, recognising them as the supreme witnesses of the faith – as martyrs.

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