

THE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA UNDER THE PRESSURE OF NORMALISATION IN 1969–1989

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This article presents the status of the Greek Catholic Church during a defined period. It brings the functioning of this religion in the period of normalisation of society closer.

Methods. Our study is the result of archival and document-based research, as well as expert studies and monographs dealing with the above-mentioned issue.

Results. Although we can define the period studied in our research as a period of relative freedom when compared with the years 1950–1967, it cannot be perceived as a total liberation of the Church. Unfortunately, the political reality was also reflected in the life and functioning of the Church itself. The Greek Catholic Church and its leaders understood that without the necessary support from the state and regime, they would lose their freedom mainly attained in the first half of 1968.



Conclusion. The Greek Catholic Church had to face several important and ground-breaking tasks that were to ensure its stability for functioning and administration after 18 years of its non-existence. This involved receiving state consent for Consecrator ThDr. Basil (Vasil') Hopko, leadership of the Greek Catholic Church in general, consolidation of relationships and conflict resolution between the Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, or even the area of support and consent for building its own institute of theological formation.

Keywords: Greek Catholic Church, normalisation, society, freedom.

The first half of 1968 represented a great hope for the improvement of the status of the Greek Catholic Church. The regime change promoted by Antonín Novotný and led by Alexander Dubček was a symbol of hope for the Catholic Church in improving its status. This period is described in the literature as a phase of building socialism with a human face. Several state institutions in Czechoslovakia wanted to improve their position, and the Church itself was no exception. It also wanted to become a support and reinforcement for individuals and society (Binetti et al., 2021). It was an attempt to re-support the emergence of free culture, even within the framework of religious experience in connection with the return to the formation of ethics based on the Christian foundation (Maturkanič et al., 2021; García Martín et al., 2021). An effort of both countries – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic – helped to achieve this goal. One of the most outstanding figures of the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic was a current servant of God, Bishop Josef Hlouch (Weis, 2021).

The elements distorting the applicable ecclesiastical laws were gradually removed at the end of March (1968). The Greek Catholic Church was also involved in this effort. A strong offensive was created, even among the members of the so-called Prague Ring, which was represented by Bishops Basil (Vasil') Hopko and Ivan Ljavinec. It was Bishop Hopko who addressed a letter to the Czechoslovak government, asking for the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church. However, he was not alone in his activity; both the clergy and the laity also sent letters. The second group of activists was established in the eastern part of Slovakia, and was headed by ThDr. Ján Murín and Štefan Lazor CSsR (Coranič, 2014). The creation of the so-called Action Committee represented the highlight of their efforts. Moreover, it was a symbol for the Greek Catholic priests, because it was acting in their best interests. One of the most important efforts of the Greek Catholic Church at that time was the meeting of the Action Committee held on April 10, 1968 (Šturák, 2018). This event brought some joy for the clergy in that they could meet again after 18 years, summarise the previous period, and set partial goals for the future. However, the representatives of the Greek Catholic Church were clearly aware that without the support of the Czechoslovak government, their efforts, as well as the fulfilment of some goals, would be almost impossible. That is why the efforts of the Greek Catholic Church and the Catholic Church, in general, were directed towards bringing religion

back into public life, even in the period leading to liberal democracy (Zalec & Pavlikova, 2019).

One week after the meeting of the Action Committee in Košice, the representatives of the Committee also met Dr. Štefan Brenčič, to whom they addressed their requests – the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church, as well as the return of the Church to the period before April 28, 1950. However, resolving the second issue was a problem that affected not only the Greek Catholic Church, but also the Orthodox Church, which presented its request based on the 18-year-care of the faithful and the clergy of the vanished Greek Catholic Church (SNA, 1968).

CONSOLIDATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Addressing the issues related to property and legal rights between both Churches became a challenge for the following decades. During the period of the “Prague Spring”, a ground-breaking Resolution No. 205/1968 on the permission of the Greek Catholic Church and Decree-Law No. 70/1968 on the economic security of the Greek Catholic Church were issued. In addition, the issue of a memorandum was the reaction of the Orthodox Church which sharply criticised the last-mentioned regulation. The government presented Decree-Law No. 205 in the spirit of freedom of choice for all citizens. In fact, it meant that individual temples would be under the administration of the Church of the vast majority, and the agreement between the Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church would be beneficial for the Church of minority communities (Bystrický et al., 2008).

It was difficult to resolve conflicts of jurisdiction between the Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, and for that reason the Administrative Commissions were established. Their role was, for example, to grant priests permission to work in the pastoral ministry or to assist in the division of property and agreements (Pešek & Barnovský, 1999). On November 15, 1968, most believers joined the Greek Catholic Church because of the commissions’ activities (Borza, 2003). In 1969, priests were appointed as administrators to the parishes in: Prague, Bačkov, Zbojné, Malý Lipník, Matysová, Šapinec, Žakovce, Stankovce, Údol, Michalovce, Slovinky, Chmeľová, Ložín, Malčice, Remeniny, Malé Zalužice, Strážske, Korunková, Zemplínska Teplica, Vyšný Tvarožec, and Vranov – Čemerné (AGAP, 1969b). Although the state leaders wanted to push the problem between both Churches aside, in March 1969 the Minister of Culture was assigned the task aimed at resolving and consolidating the whole situation (Pešek & Barnovský, 2004). There are several testimonies and descriptions pointing to the takeover of the parishes. This can be seen, for example, in the parish in Veľká Poľana, where Father Ósz was appointed as an administrator of the parish on September 15, 1968. He repeatedly asked for the

handover of the parish agenda, inventory, and its treasury but he was not successful. He met with resistance from the priest Vladimír Petršek (AGAP, 1968k).

In some parishes, the faithful split into two groups. The first group of believers was willing to recognise the reassigned priest to the parish. On the other hand, the believers in the second group wanted the former Orthodox priest, despite them having reported to the Greek Catholic Church (AGAP, 1968i). The takeover of the churches was different in the individual parishes. Father Vojtech Havaši testifies that after arriving in his parish, he called on the faithful to register if they were Orthodox. When nobody responded positively, he stayed to serve mass for them and the whole parish returned to the faith of the Greek Catholic Church (Babjak, 2001). Sometimes the settlement of the situation between the Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church had to be confirmed by a decision of the District Council, for example in the village of Úpor. The court found that the Greek Catholic Church (AGAP, 1968j) had become the successor of the Orthodox Church. Several parishes were in conflict, for example, the parish in Chotča. In 1967, the faithful decided to start building their own church and they completed it in 1969. Subsequently, the whole village returned to the faith of the Greek Catholic Church. Based on the decision of the state, both Churches were asked to share the same church building, even though no one in the village was reported to be Orthodox. However, the door to the church had remained locked until the situation was resolved (Hlinka, 1987).

The Greek Catholic Church had to face several challenging and difficult tasks after its non-existence. Nonetheless, we can find an element of great faith in some documents and records. Namely, the parish in Zvala, which addressed its request to the Greek Catholic Eparchy on September 28, 1968 (AGAP, 1968e). Similarly, the faithful in the parish in Hromoš wrote a letter regarding the administration of their parish to the Greek Catholic Eparchy on September 30, 1968 (AGAP, 1968f).

In the following years, Ordinary Ján Hirka tried to persuade the priests in the individual parishes to act peacefully and in a consolidated manner, while adapting to the existing possibilities (AGAP, 1970b). In 1969, *Ohlas pri príležitosti Veľkonočných sviatkov* (An Announcement on the Occasion of the Easter Holidays) was issued as a response to the problems between both religions. Its content remarked on several riots occurring in the east of the country, which interfered with socio-religious life. Representatives of the Churches, Bishop Dr. Ambróz Lazík (representative of the Roman Catholic Church), Bishops Dr. Vasil Hopko and Ján Hirka (representatives of the Greek Catholic Church), and Metropolitan Dorotej (representative of the Orthodox Church), who issued the announcement, stressed the appointment of an inter-church commission composed of the highest members and representatives of all three Churches. Their aim was to resolve conflicts in the spirit of the intentions of the Second Vatican Council. The letter also presented all possible difficulties that could arise. (AGAP, 1969a).

On January 26, 1970, Miroslav Válek, the Minister of Culture in the Slovak government, and Ordinary Ján Hirka discussed the status, as well as the activities of the Greek Catholic Church at their meeting. In his speech, Ján Hirka pointed out the injustice inflicted on the Greek Catholic believers making up about 90% of the total number of believers in Eastern Slovakia until 1950. He spoke about their spiritual needs, which could not be fully satisfied by the Orthodox Church because the faithful were not familiar with its tradition. He also stated that despite the absence of a bishop's residence and a seminar, 200 parishes had accepted the faith of the Greek Catholic Church. In his speech, he presented the list of parishes in Medzilaborce, Krásny Brod, Ubľa, and Šapinec where they had reached an agreement and could share the church building. On the other hand, sharing church buildings was not permitted in those parishes where the inhabitants mostly considered themselves Greek Catholics, for example in Miková or Šarišské Čierne (AGAP, 1970a).

Several of the priests' testimonies refer to a situation related to sharing the church buildings with the Orthodox Church, and the disagreements that often arose. One of them is the testimony of Father Vojtech Boháč, who was pastorally active at this turning point. In his memoirs, he presents several disagreements and disputes arising from a shared property. Both Churches had equal representation of the sharing churches; however, the Orthodox Church had better conditions. It was very common that after Greek Catholic rites or liturgies, many Orthodox believers, who were waiting outside the church building, insulted the Greek Catholic believers leaving the church (Boháč, 2018).

After the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church, spiritual life in the form of religious education in primary schools began to expand slowly. In the parish in Tichý Potok, religious education started on September 17, 1968, and in Žakovce, it was on September 21, 1968. Education took place in 2 or 3 groups on Fridays and Saturdays (AGAP, 1968d). The parish administrator in Oľka reported a similar situation. Younger children had religious classes for two hours on Thursdays and older children for two hours, starting at 4 pm, on Fridays (AGAP, 1968h).

According to the regulations, the priests had to have valid state consent for the administration of the individual parishes or pastoral offices, and it was preceded by an official request. The letter from Father Štefan Ujhélyi addressed to the District National Committee (ONV) in Košice best demonstrates this. In the above-mentioned letter, he asked for permission for Father Jozef Molčányi, who ran the parish in Repejov, Father Nicefor Petrašovič (the parish in Rafajovce), Father Myrón Podhajecký (the parish in Veľká Poľana), Father Gabriel Kopčay (the parish in Ňagov), Father Mikuláš Szigeti (the parish in Čertižné) and Father Michal Šutaj (the parish in Humenné) (AGAP, 1968a). On July 30, 1968, Fathers Andrej Timkovič, Dezider Tink, and Michal Čintal were the first priests to be granted state consent (AGAP, 1968b).

OTHER "ROADMAP" STEPS OF THE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH DURING THE PERIOD OF NORMALISATION

The period of normalisation was an extremely hard time for the Greek Catholic Church. Although the Church was neither abolished nor liquidated after the arrival of the Warsaw Pact occupation forces, we cannot talk about immediate freedom of religion. The ongoing "project" for the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church began to stagnate. It was not because of the lack of involvement of the clergy or laity, but due to the resistance and obstacles of post-August politics, which practically continued until the fall of Communism.

The wing of the Greek Catholic clergy did not remain inactive at that time. On October 10, 1968, it presented its vision and requirements, which became the series of the most important actions for the ardent clergy of the Greek Catholic Church for the period of normalisation which followed. The first action was directly linked to Bishop ThDr. Basil (Vasil') Hopko, whom the clergy asked for a restoration of reputation, as well as granting state consent. It was an extremely important task, as the Greek Catholic Church needed its own Consecrator to ordain candidates for the priesthood in the future. Another task was to ensure the presence of the auxiliary Bishop. It was an extremely important task because of the older age of Bishop ThDr. Basil (Vasil') Hopko, his poor health and an endless number of duties necessary for the existence of the Greek Catholic Church in the following years. Ján Hirka, Ivan Ljavinec, and Juraj Bumbera were possible candidates. Although getting approval to establish the Bishop's Ordinariate in Košice on July 17 was extremely beneficial, the release and the takeover of the bishop's residence in Prešov was an equally important task. Getting approval for the establishment of the Faculty of Theology in Prešov was a priority as well.

December 20, 1968, when Father Ján Hirka was appointed as a temporary Ordinary of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia with the rights of resident Bishop and Apostolic Administrator, was a positive starting point for the fulfilment of the first and second tasks. Bishop ThDr. Basil (Vasil') Hopko became Consecrator, and the act of ordination was based on the information included in the ordination letter from the Ministry of Culture of the SSR in Bratislava on April 2, 1969 (Šturák, 2016).

Today, 18 years symbolise a number that confirms an individual as a responsible adult going through various life epochs, formation, and education. The Greek Catholic Church has also been strongly affected by 18 years of its non-existence. For several years, the formation of theology students has been completed by earning a degree and getting an education for their religious work. Each year, the individual Churches ordain several candidates to assist in the pastoral ministry. However, this possibility was denied to the Greek Catholic Church for 18 years in the past. During that period, according to the statistics of the Greek Catholic Ordinary, the Greek Catholic Church lost about 90–100 priests (AGAP, n.d.). Priests exercising their

pastoral offices before 1950 were older after the restoration of the Church, and they often had various health problems which resulted from their exportation to the Czech border, where they had worked as state employees often struggling with poor working conditions. Many of them returned to Slovakia before the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church, especially in 1956, 1957, 1959, 1960, and 1962. The total number of Greek Catholic priests was 163 at the end of November, while at the end of the same year, the Greek Catholic Church took over about 200 parishes (AGAP, n.d). Therefore, the requirement to establish a theological faculty became a very important mission for the Greek Catholic Ordinariate located in Prešov. At the beginning of 1970 the Ministry of Culture, together with the Ministry of the Interior and the District National Committees, began a political analysis of the Greek Catholic clergy (Pešek & Barnovský, 2004). The issue of the Greek Catholic clergy was one of the topics discussed at the meeting between the Ordinary Ján Hirka and the Minister of Culture Miroslav Válek, which took place at the beginning of 1970, as well as at the meeting between the Minister, Deans and the Ordinary held on February 10, 1970 (Petro, 2009; Pešek & Barnovský, 2004). A plenary meeting of our clergy was also attended by state officials ("Slovo", 1970). However, these activities did not bring the desired outcomes. On the contrary, all efforts finished in further repression of the Greek Catholic Church. In 1970, state consent, which was necessary for the performance of pastoral service in parishes, was revoked for 7 priests. Moreover, the publication of the magazine *Slovo* was also suspended. The establishment of the Faculty of Theology was one of the promising solutions for the education of future priests. Several requests in this area were addressed to the Government of the Czechoslovak Republic. The first of them had been already submitted in the period before the arrival of the occupying forces of the Warsaw Pact on August 15, 1968 (AGAP, 1968c). This issue was emphasised several times – the newly formed student council met on September 14 and on October 3; the head office for priestly formation issued the Curriculum. The formation took place on October 14 – 19 (AGAP, 1968g). Several candidates had the ambition to study Catholic Theology, but unfortunately, not everyone was given a real chance to study. The Ordinariate realised that its own institution could help. Unfortunately, the capacities of the Cyril and Methodius Faculty of Theology, or even studies in Litoměřice, could not meet the needs of the Greek Catholic Church or the interest of the candidates at that time. Studying in Bratislava was subject to strict criteria. Students were required to submit relevant documents such as a school-leaving certificate, birth certificate, certificate of citizenship, baptismal certificate, marriage certificate, application to a university, medical certificate, CV, recommendation letter from a local priest, and an application for admission to university (AGAP, 1974). Some applications also contained specific documents such as approval of the Local National Committee, which included the applicant's working experience, performance, and participation in social issues (AGAP, 1973).

The external form of study, carried out in the building of Eparchy of Košice, was one of the possible ways to continue in studies at that time, and it covered the needs of 35 candidates. However, the existence of this field office in Košice did not last long. At the beginning of 1970 the educational institution was banned (Šturák, 2018).

The appeal for the establishment of an independent institution of the Faculty of Theology continued. The request was repeatedly submitted on December 21, 1969, July 5, 1969, December 18, 1969, February 16, 1970, and January 26, 1971. Despite all requests, reasons, fulfilment of the requirements, the solution proposals, the Greek Catholic Ordinariate did not receive a favourable opinion, so the Greek Catholic theologians had to study in Bratislava and Litoměřice for 23 years (Kučera, 1996).

However, neither the constant activity of the Ordinariate nor the Ordinary brought the desired outcomes. State officials did not “sympathise” with the Greek Catholic Church at the time. This is also confirmed by the report published during the meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which took place on June 5, 1985. We learn from its sections that due to the reluctance of “acceptance” necessary for the leadership of the state and other Churches, a possible change of the leadership hierarchy of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was also considered (Pešek & Barnovský, 2004).

PREPARATION FOR 1989, WHICH WAS LEADING TO A CHANGE IN CONDITIONS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Since the 1980s, the internal and external policies of the state have moved in different directions. New methods and forms for defining the direction in society were also addressed at the meetings of the XXVII and XVII Congresses of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Reaffirmation of the party’s key role – to effectively protect socialist, social, and state institutions from the hostile activity of anti-socialist elements and the reactionary Church hierarchy, was the result of these meetings (Balun, 2009). We should not forget that during the same time the “secret Church”, performing in various groups, started to perform its activities with strong efforts. These events also included a petition for the return of property to the Greek Catholic Church, which began in 1986. Gradually, petition sheets for each district were sent to the Office of the President of the Republic and the General Prosecutor’s Office. We learn from a biographical publication about Bishop Ján Hirka that the state leadership accepted them reluctantly, but began to deal with them. It was Bishop Ján Hirka, who was responsible for the organisation of the petition. However, as a kind of punishment, he did not receive state permission to attend the Synod of Bishops in Rome held in 1987 (Hirka, 2013).

At the beginning of 1988, another important petition began. Its aim was not only to achieve the freedom of the Church and the appointment of new

bishops, but also to express dissatisfaction with the state and with the progress of social development. In autumn 1987, Cardinal Tomášek, together with the Moravian Catholics, took the lead in fighting against the whole situation. The initial intention was to connect two efforts into one goal – one in Slovakia and the other one in the Moravia Region. And for that reason, the two wings merged, and in the first two weeks the representatives of Slovakia handed over 95,000 signatures to Cardinal Tomášek. “The joint activity of the Czech and Slovak wings brought support – the number of signatures amounted to 501,590 including 291,284 signatures of Slovaks” (Šimulčík, 1998, p. 23).

In 1986, the members of the Fatima community started their meetings under the leadership of Vladimír Jukl, Silvester Krčméry, and Ján Chryzostom Korec in Slovakia. They discussed the direction of the activities aimed at restoration of the Catholic Church (Čarnogurský, 2009), based on the proposal made by Marián Šťastný. The demonstration took place on March 25, 1988, on Hviezdoslavovo Námestie (Hviezdoslav Square) in Bratislava (Mikloško, 2009). It was also a sign showing that the Catholic Church claimed to change its position in Czechoslovakia. However, the preparation began earlier, in the autumn of 1987. Despite being banned and several active members of the “secret” Church being arrested, it did actually take place. Even though it did not leave a large impact on Slovakia’s domestic policy, it had a greater response abroad. Activities such as demonstrations or petitions were supplemented by pilgrimages that took place in several centres of religious life in Czechoslovakia at that time. Pilgrimages, a way of expression which could not be controlled by the state and its mechanisms, became places of assembly of believers, often attended by a high number of worshippers. It was difficult to control them with the representatives of the National State Security because of the lack of its active members. The reason for the pilgrimages was strongly religious. After a period of rehearsals, they represented a symbol of freedom for believers, who started to build communities, but on the other hand, they could not hold in the same locality. We give the following example of an important Marian pilgrimage site of Lutina, both in the past and in the present. “In 1969, more than 30,000 pilgrims visited the hill, while in 1986, their number rose to 40,000 pilgrims” (Dancák, 2010, p. 69-71). The then Ordinary Ján Hirka in his biography claims that in 1987, about 50,000 pilgrims gathered for the event (Hirka, 2013). It was at this important pilgrimage site that the proclaimed Marian Year was extended. It was supposed to last for the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia until December 8, 1988, and thus, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (originally the Marian Year was supposed to end on August 15) (FD, 1989).

On December 4, 1989, the clergy of the Greek Catholic Church met and subscribed to the demands of the *Občianske fórum* (Civic Forum) and the *Verejnosc proti násiliu* (Public Against Violence) initiative. In their official sta-

tement we can find information that during that time, there were 500,000 believers in 201 parishes and 218 clergymen including retirees following the faith of the Greek Catholic Church or specific requirements of the Greek Catholic clergy such as:

- We ask the government authorities to repeal all government regulations resulting from misinformation of the synod of Prešov (prešovský sobor).
- We file a complaint about violation of § 4 par. 2 Act. 22/1964 Coll. on the Implementation of Changes - Geodesy of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in the property ownership records of the Greek Catholic Church, in accordance with the original entries in the land register.
- We demand a restoration of reputation for Bishop Pavol Gojdič and other unjustly persecuted and convicted members of the Greek Catholic Church.
- We agree with the requirements of other Churches in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic for the repeal of the law on state supervision over Churches and the granting of state consent for spiritual activities.
- We ask to create conditions for the activation in the field of construction, teaching, education, male and female religious organisations, and all pastoral needs corresponding to cooperation. We call on all our priests and believers to enforce these demands in a spirit of Christian love (Krenický, 1990, p. 3).

CONCLUSION

The twentieth century is undoubtedly an important milestone for the Greek Catholic Church as for its history and formation. In the first half of the twentieth century, the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were affected mainly by three important epochs: the fading Hungarianisation of society, the ideology of Slovak National Socialism (Fat'ľa, 2020, p. 140), and the communist era. The period from February 1948 to 1968 was reflected in the life of the clergy as well as the faithful. Communism manifested itself in three aspects: the idea of post-mortem justice through the administration of justice already here on earth; incorrect argumentation in religion and the ideology of Communism, which was supposed to bring about perfect justice (Šturák & Lukáčová, 2020). The following period of normalisation in 1969–1989, brought euphoria on the one hand, but also fears for the future, on the other hand. The ruling regime in Czechoslovakia did not suppress religious freedom as it had done during the years before. However, it took steps to curb it, monitor it, and keep it under control. The Warsaw Pact invasion interrupted the hope of 1968 that influenced the following 20 years. The poor health of elderly priests or believers, who after an 18-year period took care of their lives individually, still had a great zeal for restoring what was the most important. During that time,

the Greek Catholic Church had to face several challenges such as: state consent for Consecrator ThDr. Basil (Vasil') Hopko and the leadership of the Greek Catholic Church in general, consolidation and settlement of relationships between the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches as well as support and consent for building its own institute for theological formation. Despite all difficulties, there were several groups and individuals willing to enter the restoration process because of their faith and religious beliefs. Even this epoch of history can become a symbol of zeal for today's people to help them keep their faith and preserve their values in various areas of life, where they devote themselves too much to freedom that is often boundless (Pavliková & Zalec, 2019).

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