

Slovakia: Yesterday and Today

by Dr. Josef Mikloško

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The Slovak Republic is one of the world's youngest states. Seen through the prism of its complicated and painful history, in which Christianity has always played a dominant role, I would like to report on this small land in the middle of Europe, and also bring to the fore the most important facts of its history—from which it is evident that Slovakia has a history of which it need not feel ashamed. I would also like to give an eyewitness report on the most recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Slovakia.

The Slovak Republic has a population of 5.3 million: 85.6% Slovakian, 10.8% Hungarian, 1.6% Romanian, 1% Czech. The surface area covers 49,000 km². The land is mostly mountainous, and has many rivers, reservoirs, and mineral water springs. The highest mountain is Gerlach, in the High Tatra range (2,655 m). Eighty percent of the land lies above the height of 750 m. Approximately 40% of the surface area is covered with forest, 30.8% is cultivated as farmland, and 16.6% is pastureland. Forty-four percent of the popula-

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tion was employed in industry and construction, 13.9% in agriculture—the exact figures cannot be ascertained today, owing to the high unemployment rate of more than 13%.

In March 1991, the population was 60.3% Roman Catholic, 6.2% Evangelical, and 3.4% Greek Catholic; 9.7% are atheists, and 18.2% are without religious designation. The Roman Catholic Church has 2,010 priests, 318 monks, and 2,866 nuns. Currently, 826 theologians study in Catholic seminaries, as well as 1,508 lay people, who also study theology. Approximately 3% of all schools are in the hands of the Catholic Church.

Slovakia is not rich in material terms. Its greatest wealth is in its people, their talent, productivity, and creative power. The first university in the land, the Istropolitan Academy, was founded in A.D. 1465. At present, there are sixteen colleges in Slovakia. The most important scientific institution is the Slovakian Academy of Science.

The History of Slovakia

Celts settled the Slovak region as early as the Fourth century B.C. Around the

year 1000, Germans came here. In the First century after Christ, the border of the Roman Empire was on the Danube River, and Romans were stationed there as well as to the east of the Danube in the Slovakian region. At the end of the Fourth century A.D., the population of that time would have suffered an invasion of Huns.

In the course of the Fifth century, the Slovakian Slavic peoples came into the region and, after a successful march against the Avars, united, and between 623 and 658, created a first state structure, the kingdom of Samo.

In the Eighth century, Christianity got a foothold here, thanks to the activity of missionaries coming from more westerly centers. At the beginning of the Ninth century, the Slavic prince Pribina, who in 828 consecrated the first Christian church in Middle Europe, reigned in Nitra. In 833, his successor founded the Great Moravian Empire, which, under Svätopluk I (870-894) had a scope of 300,000 km² and achieved great scientific and cultural advances, although threatened by the Franks.

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Soviet tanks roll into Prague's Wenceslaus Square, Aug. 21, 1968.

Inset: Alexander Dubček.



UPI/Beitmann

the independence of his empire, in 863 invited from Byzantium the missionaries SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius, with their disciples, into the Great Moravian Empire. They succeeded in establishing their own church province and, with Rome's permission, introduced the old Slavic language as the official language of the church.

Since 885, when the activities of Cyril and Methodius came to an end, they have remained unforgotten throughout the whole history of Slovakia, and still form today the most important cultural and religious tradition, because the characteristic Slavic language, writing, liturgy (with a special chant which represents a mixture of Byzantine and Western elements), and legal system are still standing.

At the beginning of the Tenth century, the Great Moravian Empire and that of the Franks fell under the weight of the warlike Magyar tribes, owing to the disunity of the three sons of King Svätopluk. The Slovaks in the following centuries were increasingly part of Hungary.

In the Thirteenth century, half the residents of the country were lost through the invasion of Tatars. The Hussites occupied Slovakia from 1421 to 1434. Following the battle at Mohács in 1526, Slovakia was increasingly pressed by the Turk.

Slovakia was the heartland of old Hungary, and Bratislava was Hungary's capital (until 1784), which the Haps-

burgs incorporated in their empire. The Hungarian Parliament met in Bratislava and from 1563 to 1830, and eleven Hapsburg emperors and Hungarian kings and queens were crowned here.

In the Sixteenth century, the country was won over by the Reformation—at the beginning of the Seventeenth century, 70% of the population was Evangelical or Calvinist. This changed in the course of the Seventeenth century, with the Counter-Reformation, and Slovakia became majority Roman Catholic.

At the end of the Eighteenth century, in the period of the Enlightenment, the national awakening of Slovakia began. In 1787, Anton Bernolák codified the written language for the first time. More successful, however, was Ľudovít Štúr, who took not the West-Slovakian, but rather the Middle-Slovakian dialect, as the foundation of the written language. Štúr was then also one of the leaders of the unsuccessful revolutionary movement of Slovaks in 1848. In 1861, the Slovaks presented a proposal for autonomy, but neither Vienna nor Hungary recognized it.

After the Austro-Hungarian settlement in 1867, an aggressive Magyarization was introduced in Hungary, which sought to dissolve the Slovakian people. In 1906-07, Slovakian elementary schools were banned.

Following the First World War, the

Republic of Czecho-Slovakia came into being on October 28, 1918. The then-leader of Slovakia, Andrej Hlinka, said: "The thousand-year marriage with Hungary was unfortunate. We must depart from one another. . . . I'm for the Czecho-Slovakian orientation."

The Czechs understood the new republic as centrist and unitary (rather than speaking of the Slovakian nation—next to the Czech—they spoke only of a Czecho-Slovakian nation), but the Slovaks wanted their autonomy from the beginning.

In 1938, the Western powers, through the Munich Treaty, sacrificed Czecho-Slovakia to Hitler. On October 6, 1938 the autonomy of Slovakia was proclaimed in Žilina; on March 14, 1939, under pressure from Hitler, Slovakia was proclaimed as an independent Slovakian Republic. On August 29, 1944, an anti-fascist revolt flamed up in Slovakia, the second-largest after Yugoslavia. The Germans occupied the nation and bloodily crushed the revolt.

Following the Second World War, Czecho-Slovakia was revived with the approval of the great powers. Unfortunately, however, the concerns and wishes of Slovaks were again undervalued. With the free election on May 26, 1946, the Communists were victorious in Czechia (38.1%); in Slovakia the citizens' Democratic Party won (62%). In

the entire republic, however, the Communists received the majority—although they had 1,266,000 members in Czechia, and only 128,000 in Slovakia.

The Slovak Communists supported Prague centralism, and heightened the internal policial crisis. In February the Communists led a putsch and began the introduction of a total dictatorship, with Stalinist repression, fictitious political processes, and the persecution of the Church. Thus began forty years of communist dictatorship.

In 1968, an attempt at reform was undertaken. The leader of the Prague Spring was the Slovakian communist Alexander Dubček. His unrealistic dream of socialism with a human face was butchered in blood after eight months on Aug. 21, 1968, by Soviet tanks. For the next twenty years, “normalization” was established under the leadership of another Slovakian communist, Gustáv Husák—this meant repression of human rights and freedoms. In October, the laws of the Czecho-Slovak Federation were adopted, but were again dissymmetrical, with the power center in Prague.

On December 30, 1977, the Holy See established its Slovakian church province, which is identical with the borders of today’s Slovakia.

Following the fall of the totalitarian regime in November 1989, the accumulated social problems again became real. The transformation of society began. Slovaks wanted a decentralization of power and authority; the Czechs did not understand this, and wanted to remain in a “functioning federation.” Discussions of the division of authority between the federation and the republic were held without success for two years.

Following the election in June 1992, the two victorious parties, in Czechia the Citizens Democratic Party of Václav Klaus, and in Slovakia the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia of Vladimír Mečiar, on different bases, agreed to the dissolution of the common state. This was accepted by the two parliaments, and thus on January 1, 1993, two independent states were created by peaceful means—the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Thus, an old dream of Slovaks came to fulfillment at last, although

under the leadership of ex-communists and atheists, in a difficult economic situation, and with a divided people.

Christianity in Slovakia

The population of today’s Slovakia had come into contact with Christianity by the Second century. Archaeological finds indicate the presence of Christians in Bratislava in the Fourth century. In the Ninth century, Prince Rastislav recognized the political influence gained through the activity of German missionaries, and, for this reason, in 861 he sent his emissaries to Rome to request the creation of Slovakia’s own church province. Pope Nicholas I did not fill this request, so Rastislav sent a new delegation to Constantinople. There, in 863, the Emperor Michael II sent the brothers Constantine-Cyril and Methodius to the Great Moravian

flict with King Svätopluk, and had to defend the true faith of his mission once again in Rome. After the second return to Great Moravia, Methodius died here on April 6, 885. After his death, the Slavic liturgy was banned and his students were driven out of the land. But the Slavic liturgy, through the collapse of Great Moravia, was not wholly forgotten, especially by the members of the religious orders. Our forebears nourished the seed of SS. Cyril and Methodius from one generation to another.

The national consciousness, nourished above all by priests, grew abundantly in the Nineteenth century. In the fight for the right of nationhood at that time, Catholics and Evangelicals worked closely together. In 1863, the inter-confessional association “Matica Slovenská” was founded, and in 1870 the Catholic association of St. Adalbert.

In A.D. 863, the brothers SS. Cyril and Methodius were sent to the Great Moravian Empire, where they instructed our forefathers in the Christian faith, produced for them the Glagolitic alphabet, and translated the Holy Scripture and other liturgical books into the language of the Slavic churches. Consequently, the Slavs received their own grammar, literature, translations, and liturgy in their mother tongue earlier than many civilized nations of Europe.

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In 867 they visited Rome, where in 868 Pope Hadrian II ratified the language of the Slavic Church as the official liturgical language. He established for Great Moravia its own archbishopric, with Methodius as the first archbishop. The Slavs, then known as Slovieni, consequently received their own grammar, literature, translations, and liturgy in their mother tongue earlier than many civilized nations of Europe.

Constantine-Cyril took sick in Rome and died there on February 14, 869. Methodius returned, but fell into con-

Beginning in the Twentieth century, the leader of the Catholic Slovaks, a priest named Andrej Hlinka, worked together with the Evangelical priest and author Martin Rázus; they fought for the rights and autonomy of Slovakia. And so, the country maintained its national consciousness and faith into the Twentieth century, despite repression, emigration, want, and war.

Following the putsch in February 1948, the communists began a massive fight against the Church and all democratic powers. At that time, tens of thousands were illegally sentenced to a combined many hundreds of thousands of years in prison. All religious orders, Church schools, and religious publishers and hospitals, were outlawed, i.e., dissolved. During two nights in 1950, more

than nine hundred cloisters were liquidated and approximately 15,000 members of religious orders interned.

Following a short thaw in 1968, the church was again for twenty years a silent and suffering community, which survived despite everything. It worked above all in a well-organized underground. Regular meetings of children, youth, and families were secretly conducted, "Samizdats" spread massively, and religious books were smuggled in from the West. Hundreds of thousands of the faithful took part in Marian pilgrimages. The tip of this iceberg took shape in the 200,000-person protest in Velehrad in 1985, the call for religious freedom by Cardinal Tomášek in 1988 with 600,000 endorsements, and the brutally repressed "Candle Demonstration" on March 25, 1988 in Bratislava, with which the "Soft Revolution" began.

Five Year After the Turning Point

The fall of the Iron Curtain was similar to the fall of the Roman Empire. It was demonstrated that a better world could be built on the ruins of the communist dictatorship, but it has proved to be an ever more difficult task. The enthusiasm over the end of communism awakened illusions about a quick improvement in the state of society and its future unity. After forty years of slavery we are free, but thralldom returned in another dress. Instead of joy over new possibilities, we are impatient, weary, and disappointed. We tolerate the emergence of "Sovietization" of thought: pessimism, passivity, envy, and rule from above. The orientation to short-term goals and easy solutions brings no results. We were not prepared for the assault of "consumerism," the primitive "mass culture," the rising criminality. Privatization without morality, corruption, and vain attempts at obtaining wealth without ethical norms, are dangerous. The market cannot solve all problems. In politics, hatred, revenge, seeking out enemies, and debt re-established themselves. People are again concerned about the possibility of a return of totalitarianism.

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become ever larger. Thus, it is certain that Europe will either have a common future, or none at all. We should therefore follow the direction of the Papal social encyclicals, more than shock therapy of the I.M.F., in order to not provoke new social convulsions.

The church had suffered grievously before the turning point in the totalitarian state, while enjoying a great authority, however. Again today, the attacks on the Church are led by the "old structures" and by manipulated people. Many also want to minimize the role of Christianity in their interpretation of the bankruptcy of communism. Those who lack the courage to attack the Church directly, direct their criticism against the Christian Democracy.

Pope John Paul II in Slovakia

Pope John Paul II, "1994 Man of the Year," is a charismatic personality. He was a worker, sportsman, poet, dramatist, and is a philosopher, author, and theologian. He is a man of faith and of prayer, a messenger of peace and of love. He conducts a dialogue with an individual just as he does with millions. His pontificate is filled with his concern to help people who are without hope.

The Pope has written twelve encyclicals, completed sixty-six apostolic trips to many countries, and carried out many beatifications and canonizations. In his latest encyclical, titled *Evangelization of Life*,



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Pope John Paul II in Slovakia.

Above: *At Kosice airport, July 2, 1995.*

Right: *Open-air mass, Levoča, July 3.*

he speaks for the culture of love for life, and about the protection of life from conception to its natural end. With his sixty-six apostolic trips, which lasted a total of 432 days, the Pope has visited 106 countries, delivered 1,959 homilies and speeches, and flown nearly a million kilometers.

His forty-sixth trip was a two-day visit to Czecho-Slovakia in April 1990. He also visited, for a single hour, the capital of Slovakia, Bratislava, where he encountered nearly a million faithful. On April 22, 1990 at 4:21 P.M., he kissed the Slovakian soil at the Vajnory Airport, and thereby honored a country that had so severely suffered during forty years of atheistic totalitarianism. "I came to you after the forty-year wandering in the desert, as after so many Good Fridays the Easter sun appears with the festive Alleluia." After the two-hour celebration, the Pope consecrated two hundred foundation stones for new churches, and took leave of the million faithful, who sang the song "O Maria Thou Mournful, You Protect Us," with the words "Until we see you again!" He left behind there a profound trail of faith, of love, and of hope.

From the foundation stones consecrated there, approximately eighty-one new churches were built. His "until we see you again" he fulfilled shortly there-

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Beitmann/Reuters

after, as, with his sixty-sixth trip, he visited the independent Slovakia.

He came at a time for which the words of St. Augustine ring true: "You run well, but on a bad track." The atmosphere of euphoria about newly gained freedom is finally gone; the situation is worse than it was in 1990. In place of a new morality, tolerance, and spiritual culture, we are living through disunity, thoughtlessness, and avarice.

On Good Friday 1995, the Salesians organized an unconventional Stations of the Cross in Petržalka, a gigantic silo-like residence on the right bank of the Danube. The fourteen stations were in front of a brothel, a discotheque, a prison, and an area where recently murder, suicide, brutality, and abortions had occurred. This, too, is today's Slovakia.

The Slovaks, who see themselves as a Christian people in the Cyril-Methodius

tradition, are hardly conducting themselves in this tradition, however. The wounds of totalitarianism are deeper than generally understood. Under cover of freedom and democracy, Christianity was put into question, and Christians were again shoved aside.

Five years ago, the Pope was greeted by former communists who barely knew the Our Father. This year, when there is only one solitary member of the regime without a communist past, it was the same.

The visit of the Pope occurred from June 30 to July 3, 1995. During these days, the Holy Father visited the capital at Bratislava, Nitra, the place of pilgrimage Šaštín, Košice, Prešov, a further place of pilgrimage Levoča, and the High Tatra. His visit was received with great jubilation and joy. At the divine services nearly two million faithful took part, more than a third of all

the residents of Slovakia.

The Pope opened his meetings everywhere with the words "Peace be with you," and ended with the words, "until we see you again!" Only God knows whether this Pope—who spoke the entire time in Slovakian, and, what is more, who said, "I was born a Pole, but in my heart I am a Slovak"—will visit our country once more.

On June 30, 1995, the President of the Slovakian Republic, Michael Kováč, greeted the Pope with the words: "Today, in the hour of weariness and of resignation by many, I ask you to bring us courage, and to bring our faith out of the private sphere, out of the churches, and into the political, cultural and economic life." To the priests, members of orders, and seminarians, the Pope said, in the Bratislava Cathedral: "During the communist dictatorship many of you proved yourselves heroic and true to Christ. With Him you have suffered, successfully resisting injustice and brutality. Your suffering has brought rich fruits of holiness and God's mercy and will yet bring you more."

The evening before, the Pope had met with youth in the time-honored Nitra, the cradle of Slovakian Christianity. The altar was adorned with an eight-meter-high crucifix, cut from a hundred-year-old linden tree. The Bishop of Nitra, Cardinal Ján Chrysostom Korec, who had secretly ordained priests and bishops, and, though not guilty, had spent ten years in prison for his faith, greeted the Pope. To work, he had written more than sixty religious books, which could only first appear after the political change-over.

The Holy Father told the 300,000 mostly youth, "Build the bridge between the second and third millennia, consecrate yourself entirely to the work of the new evangelization. Do not fear the radical demands of evangelizing. Know that the Holy Spirit is stronger in you than the spirit of the world. SS. Cyril and Methodius, at the risk of their own lives, refused to subordinate their faith to power. Don't let yourselves be deceived by the ideology of false freedom."

The Pope interspersed his sober speech, delivered in Slovakian, with Polish comments, which were understood by

all, as were his puns and humorous remarks. At the end, the young people sang and danced together with the Pope. The representatives of the youth received the encyclical *Evangelization of Life* as gifts. They dedicated anew to the Pope a spiritual bouquet of prayers, fasting, sacrifices, and communion. After his meeting with the youth, the Pope changed his program, to visit the castle in Nitra, where 1,167 years ago the first Christian house of worship in Central Europe was erected.

On July 1, the Holy Father visited Šaštín, the largest basilica of Slovakia, a baroque jewel from the year 1744. The Slovaks have often had to endure their own history of suffering and because of this, the Virgin Mary of Seven Sorrows is venerated as the patron of Slovakia. In Šaštín, the Holy Father said to 400,000 pilgrims: "It is good when one has somebody with whom to share his joy and his sorrow, when the mother is in your great Slovakian family, whom you can trust and to whom you can turn with all your sorrows and hopes."

In the Salesian cloister in Šaštín, the Pope met with the Slovakian Bishops Conference: "The coming of the third millennium calls the whole church of the world, to give clearer testimony to love and unity." In Bratislava, a meeting took place with the state President and the Prime Minister. In the evening, the Pope prayed the rosary in the Ursulinen church. At a nearby central square of the city, about 15,000 faithful prayed with candles together with the Pope.

The high point of the visit was the third day, during which, in Košice in the presence of 400,000 people, the three martyrs of Košice were canonized: the Croat Marek Križin, the Pole Milichar Grodziecki, and the Hungarian Stefan Pongrácz. They were active at the beginning of the Seventeenth century, in a time of class and religious warfare in East Slovakia, and bore witness to the strength of their faith on September 7, 1619 through their martyrdom. Among the attendees at the canonization were 11,500 citizens from the birthplace of the Croatian saint. The Holy Father delivered part of his speech in each of the three mother tongues of the new saints.

In the afternoon, in Prešov, the Pope visited the Church of St. John the Baptist,

where the Greek Catholic Bishop Pavol Gojdič is buried. He was illegally sentenced by the communists to a years-long prison term, and died in the prison at Leopoldov. At Akatist, the Holy Father gathered with 200,000 Greek Catholic faithful at the Greek Catholic feast of the Virgin. He emphasized their faithfulness and strength in faith—this church was banished in 1950 and the faithful forced to convert to Orthodoxy. Unexpectedly, he also stopped before the plaque commemorating twenty-four brutally executed Evangelicals from East Slovakia, who in 1687 had been condemned to death by a Hapsburg military court as a result of collaboration with insurgents of Prince Thököly. The Pope shook hands with the region's Evangelical bishop, and prayed together with him.

On the last day of his Slovakian visit, the Pope went to Levoča, a tradition-rich place of pilgrimage in Slovakia. As early as 1247, a chapel with the statue of the Mother of God stood here on the Marienburg mountain. Now the Pope greeted 600,000 faithful, among whom were many Romanians, who proclaimed: "Holy Father, you have kept your word and have come to Levoča."

The Pope celebrated Mass with six cardinals, forty bishops, and a thousand priests. Eight hundred singers from nine church choirs sang. At the end, when in the silence only the nightingale trilled, the Papal hymn "In Rome on Seven Hills Was Built" rang out. The Pope then said: "That faith was able to survive in this land, we thank the witness of these houses of God. . . . Divine Providence gave you the gift of freedom. That is the opportunity and summons to build a new Civilization of Love. Here may you be ever united and free; you were bound together by faith, hope, and love, which were the guarantee of your freedom."

In Levoča, many people sat by me who a short while before had been against religion in this region, and had fought against the faith of young people. Now in the police cordons I saw them, crossing themselves during the Papal blessing. Thus, much had changed in five years in Slovakia.

Following the departure of the pilgrims, the Pope visited, in the center of the High Tatra, the Sliezszy cathedral, to

rest briefly. In the evening, he departed from the representatives of Slovakia at the Poprad Airport. At that time he once again clearly condemned the communist dictatorship, and emphasized the courage of those who fought them: "May God protect Slovakia and its inhabitants. . . . I will keep a deep memory of these blessed days. Until we meet again."

Quo Vadis, Slovakia?

The 1994 election brought to power in Slovakia a coalition of left-oriented populists and nationalists, led by Vladimír Mečiar. These politicians, who had already been twice before recalled, busied themselves with concentrating all power in their hands, in order to halt the transformation process of society, and to silence the opposition. The regime promised (but did not fulfill the promises), sought alleged enemies, and made massive purges in their own interest. It had promised to share the costs of the Papal trip as a state visit, but did not keep that promise—perhaps because the bishops' conference had taken the side of President Kováč, Mečiar wished to take back the promise at all costs.

Despite the current situation, the author of this piece is an optimist. Without a moral renewal, nothing worthwhile will be created, and nothing will become better. Christians, who are the majority of the Slovakian population, are indispensable in this process. The Papal visit called out the Christians to become agitators, to find unity, to overturn barriers, to solve conflicts. His visit signified that the Church is still ever-vigorous, that only the idea of Christianity can unify people, that the Cyril-Methodian tradition is something concrete, that the youth are discovering the value of Christianity, that one can solve the national tension in the Christian spirit, and that ecumenicism is indispensable. Slovakia has many courageous people of good will, who, united, will stop evil and will prevent a return of totalitarianism.

Slovakians are indebted, above all, to Christianity, for having enabled them to survive the problems and difficulties of the centuries. For this reason, there is for them only the way which John Paul II formulated on October 22, 1978 with his beginning: "Have no fear to receive Christ, open your doors to Him, have no fear!"