

The History of Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia

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The most important event in the history of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia was a visit of Holy Father John Paul II in Prešov on 2nd July 1995. The first steps of the pontiff led to the Cathedral of John the Baptist, where he commemorated bishop-martyr Pavol Peter Gojdič, in current times blessed. The pontiff did not commemorate only bishop of Prešov – Pavol Peter Gojdič, but also all those priests and believers who were suffering because of their faith and fidelity to Rome.

Holy Father in his speech said: “The Eastern and Western local Churches of the one universal Catholic Church differ between themselves by the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony. They have their own specific history and present manner of living.”

I would like to scope exactly the history as well as the current times of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia.

Many people ask us Greek Catholic about our roots and origin. Although Greek Catholic eparchy in Presov was established only in 1818, the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia considers itself to be the follower of the Cyril and Method's heritage. This heritage consists of:

1. The eastern spirituality
2. a liturgy in folk language
3. an unity with Rome.¹

Similar response to this questions was mentioned by the Holy Father in above mention speech, when he said: “ In history there were various occasions where it was very difficult to preserve this model, which connected the different traditions with a requirement of unity... But your presence is the expressive testimony of fidelity to such original model

¹ VASIL, C., SJ.: *Gréckokatolíci – Dejiny – osudy- udalosti*. Košice : BYZANT, 2000, p. 5.

which was realized by St. Cyril and Method; testimony of fidelity throughout the centuries. Be proud on your ancient tradition.”²

Let’s return to the early history of the Eparchy of Prešov. The way of its development was very long and very complicated; as long and complicated as time, in which the events took part, time in which periods of prosperity and development were replaced by the periods of persecution and oppression and vice versa.

Greek Catholic eparchy of Prešov was canonically founded on 22nd September 1818 by the papal bulla of Pius VII *Relata Semper*.³ The foundation of Greek Catholic eparchy of Prešov was preceded by the establishment of eparchy of Mukatchevo; the eparchy which was the center for the Greek Catholic in Austro-Hungarian empire. Many bishops of this eparchy came from Slovakia, like brothers Simeon Štefan and Michal Manuál Olšavský, Ján Bradáč; they all came from Spiš region, or like Andrej Bacinsky from Beňatin. All those bishops sustained and upheld the independence of Mukachevo before Jagr’s diocese and they caused the canonical promulgation and foundation of the eparchy of Mukatchevo by *Eximia regalium* bulla on 19th of September 1771.⁴ Because the eparchy was very large and included the area of 11 regions (župa) with 550 000 believers, 3 vicariates were created; among them was also the vicariate of Kosice- created on 27th July 1787. The first vicar of Kosice was Ivan-Kováč Pástzeli, next one Michal Bradáč moved the vicariate from Kosice to Prešov; this move was also confirmed by the imperial office on 8th March 1806.⁵

The administrative process of creation of eparchy of Prešov was still very long and difficult. Only after 10 years the emperor František I, with regards to his Patronal rights, confirmed the creation of the eparchy on 3rd November 1815.⁶ In the time of its creation the eparchy had 194 parishes and 150 000 believers in the area of 7 Western regions (komitat) of the eparchy of Mukatchevo. The emperor on 20th March 1816 nominated Gregor Tarkovic as bishop of a new established eparchy of Prešov. The emperor decided that in this newly created eparchy there would be a canonry with 5 canonists (canon).⁷ But the process of promulgation of the new eparchy was very slow and the Eparchy of Prešov was thus finally

² SZÉKELY, G.- MESAROŠ, A.: *Gréckokatolíci na Slovensku*. Košice : BYZANT, 1997, p. 83.

³ ŠTURÁK, P.: *Dejiny Gréckokatol. cirkvi v Československu v rokoch 1945-1989*. Prešov : PETRA 1999, p. 27.

⁴ PEKAR, A., OSBM: *The Bishops of the Mukachevo eparchy*. Pittsburgh 1979, p. 14.

⁵ BABJAK, J., SJ: *Michal Lacko, SJ – Informátor a formátor gréckokatolíkov*. Trnava : Dobrá kniha 1997, p. 78.

⁶ AGBP, sign. 8806-1817 *Donačná listina cisára Františka I.*

⁷ ŠTURÁK, P.: *Dejiny Gréckokatol. cirkvi v Československu v rokoch 1945-1989*. Prešov : PETRA 1999, p. 27.

established by the already mentioned bulla *Relata Semper* on 22nd September 1818. Gregor Tarkovič was confirmed as the first bishop of Prešov and after safeguarding of an economical income of the eparchy he was consecrated by the bishop of Mukatchevo Pocsym in Krasnobrod monastery on 17th July 1821.⁸ The successors of bishop Gregor Tarkovič (1818-1841) Jozef Gaganec (1843-1875)⁹, Mikuláš Tóth (1876-1882)¹⁰ and Jan Valyi (1882-1911)¹¹ contributed by their various blessed activities to the development of the eparchy in such way, that the eparchy had all necessary institutions as cathedral, residence, seminary and religious schools. Under the influence of the important social-religious changes, the eparchy had to find its place in the multiethnic Hungarian empire, where it was exposed to a pressure of Magyarization.

In the period of the important crossroad in history of our nations, in the foundation of the 1st Czechoslovak republic in 1918, the eparchy is without bishop because the temporal bishop of Prešov Štefan Novák resigned and fled to Hungary.¹² The eparchy was managed by the vicar capitular Dr. Mikuláš Rusnák (1818-1922),¹³ and later by bishop of Krizevec, Dionyz Nyaradi (1922-1927).¹⁴

His successor in eparchial see became bishop Pavol Gojdič, OSBM.(1888-1960);¹⁵ man with the extraordinaire qualities and full of spiritual life, who by his activities elevated the Eparchy of Prešov to its heyday. After his appointment for the Apostolic administrator, charisma of his personality was fully revealed. He was inaugurated in February 1927. The congratulations expressed to newly inaugurated bishop did not have enough time to cease and Gojdič was elected for the titular bishop of Harpash on 7th March 1927. He was ordained in basilica of St. Clement in Rome on 25th March 1927.¹⁶ All his actions were subordinated to his eparchial motto: “ God is Love, Let’s love Him!” Without any regards to a social status, nationality or religion he helped anyone; he did it with tender love and without any personal interests or gain. He founded and supported schools; in 1936 he founded Greek Catholic high school (gymnasium) in Prešov. His life’s work was the foundation of the eparchial orphanage.

⁸ VASIL, C., SJ.: *Gréckokatolíci – Dejiny – osudy- udalosti*. Košice : BYZANT 2000, p. 113.

⁹ AGBP, sign. 8285/445-23 *Dekrét pápeža Gregora XVI., ktorým potvrdzuje Jozefa Gaganca za prešovského biskupa*.

¹⁰ AGBP, sign. 28/1876 inv. č. 20. *Dekrét pápeža Pia IX., ktorým potvrdzuje Dr. Mikuláša Tótha za biskupa prešovskej eparchie*.

¹¹ PEKAR, A., OSBM: *Narysy istoriji cerkvi Zakarpattja*. Rím 1967, p. 207.

¹² ŠTURÁK, P.: *Dejiny Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi v Československu v rokoch 1945-1989*. Prešov : PETRA 1999, p. 33.

¹³ VASIL, C., SJ.: *Gréckokatolíci – Dejiny – osudy- udalosti*. Košice : BYZANT 2000, p. 131.

¹⁴ VASIL, C., SJ.: *Gréckokatolíci – Dejiny – osudy- udalosti*. Košice : BYZANT 2000, p. 132.

¹⁵ POTÁŠ, M., OSBM: *Dar lásky*. Prešov : 1999, p. 15.

¹⁶ POTÁŠ, M., OSBM: *Dar lásky*. Prešov : 1999, p. 65.

With his parental love he took care of the spiritual grow of his priests and believers. For his charitable relations towards his believers he was called even during his life bishop “of golden heart and father of orphans” Holy Father John Paul II beatified him on 4th November 2001 in Rome and his relics remain in the sarcophagus in lateral chapel of the Cathedral in Prešov.¹⁷

Unfortunately this period of development was violently interrupted by the political changes and accession of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia after 1948. In this gloomy period ThDr Vasil Hopko was ordained and appointed to auxiliary bishop in 1947.¹⁸ The mass media started to attack the Churches; especially their assaults were led against the Greek Catholics. In 1949 under various guises (excuses) the monasteries Of Basilians in Prešov were attacked. All attacks reach their top in so called “Synod of Prešov” (Prešovský sobor) - pseudo synod that took place on 28th April 1950, when the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was put out of law and its bishops were imprisoned.¹⁹ The priests who remained faithful to their Church were banished from their parishes and from their believers, and together with their families were transported to Czech. The believers were without their shepherds. In this time bishop P. Gojdič gave the greatest testimony, the sacrifice oh his own life, when he died in the prison in Leopoldov on 17th April 1960.²⁰

The Greek Catholic Church was forced to change its form of existence; it changed to the underground Church. Hope, which came with the social-political changes in 1968-69, had only limited duration. Although the Greek Catholic Church was renewed by the government prescriptions No. 70/1968 on 13th June 1968, its activities were hindered due to the “normalization” of the social relations.²¹ The Ecclesial jurisdiction was entrusted to the vicar (ordinar) Mons. Ján Hirka who was the Apostolic administrator with the rights of the residential bishop.²² The situation was very difficult. Although the Greek Catholic Church was renewed, the parish houses and churches were not returned to her. The interventions from state into the ecclesial affairs occurred almost daily. There was limited and slowly reduced number of accepted Greek Catholic seminarians; thought they were accepted, they had to prepare themselves for the priesthood in

¹⁷ Pavol Peter Gojdič: *Beatifikácia – Rím 4. november 2001*, Generálne Postulatúra, Gréckokatolícke biskupstvo Prešov.

¹⁸ AGBP, bez sign. *Bula zo dňa 2. januára 1947 z Ríma o menovaní za titulárneho biskupa midilenského a za pomocného biskupa prešovského ThDr. Vasila Hopku*, p. 1.

¹⁹ ŠTURÁK, P.: *Dejiny Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi v Československu v rokoch 1945-1989*. Prešov : PETRA 1999, p. 133.

²⁰ AZVJ SSR *Správy o úmrtí Gojdiča, Leopoldov*: 16/60 – A.

²¹ *Vládne nariadenie z 13. júna 1968 o hospodárskom zabezpečení gréckokatolíckej cirkvi štátom*. In: *Kalendár gréckokatolíkov 1969*. Spolok sv. Vojtecha, Trnava : 1969, p. 49-50.

²² VASIL, C., SJ.: *Gréckokatolíci – Dejiny – osudy- udalosti*. Košice : BYZANT 2000, p. 140.

the Roman Catholic seminary in Bratislava, which was permitted by the government as the only one seminary in Slovakia. Greek Catholic Church required its own seminary which was functioned before 1950, but this request was rejected. After the death of the ordaining bishop ThDr Vasil Hopko, the Greek Catholic priests were ordained by the bishops from the eparchy of Križevac in Yugoslavia.²³ Despite difficult circumstances, the Greek Catholic Church grew and developed. After 1980 it was evident especially in the mass attendance of the Ecclesial Feast celebrations in Lutina, Klokočov and in various places; those feast celebrations took place despite the various hindrances in their preparation and organizations. The real changes occurred only after November 1989. The Church resurrected. It was shown also by the nomination of the vicar Ján Hirka as residential bishop of eparchy of Prešov. The bishop ordination took place on 17. 12. 1990 and the main celebrant was H.E. Jozef cardinal Tomko.²⁴

The renewal of the church activities was linked with the lack of priest. There wasn't a possibility of formation and education of the adepts for priesthood, due to nonexistence of our own faculty and seminary. The most of the Ecclesial buildings were ruined and ramshackle. The important task which stood ahead of the church consists in building of the schools, support of the eparchial prints, and spiritual care for believers in new situations. Very difficult proved to be the property composition and settlement between our church and Orthodox church; this settlement was accomplished by the mutual agreement in year 2000. In academic year 1990-91 the seminary was reopened and the Greek Catholic Theological faculty in Prešov began its activities.²⁵ The religious schools were renewed. On 11th January 1992 Pope John Paul II appointed Mons. Milam Chatur CSsR to auxiliary bishop of the eparchy of Prešov.²⁶ The most important event in the history of the whole eparchy was a visit of Holy Father who, in his second pastoral visit in Slovakia, came to Prešov on 2nd July 1995 in order to thank all Greek Catholics for their faithfulness to Rome,²⁷ for their sacrifices and suffering. In current time eparchy of Prešov consists of 14 deantries and 135 329 believers (status on 31.12.2001).²⁸

After division of Czechoslovakia, in Czech Republic was founded vicariate and later on 15th March 1996 Holy See established apostolic exar-

²³ DANCÁK, F.: *Da vsi jedino budut – Aby všeci jedno boli*. Prešov : PETRA 2002, p. 15.

²⁴ HRIC, J. – ŠTURÁK, P.: *Prešovské biskupstvo*. Prešov : DINO 1998, p. 100.

²⁵ VASIL, C., SJ: *Kánonické pramene byzantsko-slovanskej katolíckej cirkvi v Mukačevskej a Prešovskej eparchii v porovnaní s Kódexom kánonov východných cirkví*. p. 66. Cp. Zákonné opatrenia predsedníctva SNR o usporiadaní majetkových vzťahov medzi gréckokatolíckou a pravoslávnu cirkvou zo dňa 29. mája 1990. In: Slovo 22 (1990) 8, p. 2.

²⁶ SZÉKELY, G.- MESARÓŠ, A.: *Gréckokatolíci na Slovensku*. Košice: 1997, p. 39.

²⁷ HRIC, J. – ŠTURÁK, P.: *Prešovské biskupstvo*. Prešov : DINO 1998, p. 120-121.

²⁸ HRIC, J. – ŠTURÁK, P.: *Prešovské biskupstvo*. Prešov : DINO 1998, p. 121.

chate with residence in Prague. Mons. Ivan Ljavinec became exarch and was also appointed to bishop. Mons. Ladislav Hucko was on 24th April 2003 nominated by Holy Father as the exarch.²⁹

The other important event was the constitution of the Greek Catholic Apostolic exarchate in Košice on 21st February 1997; Mons. Milan Chatur CSsR, auxiliary bishop of the eparchy of Prešov, was appointed to manage this new exarchate.³⁰ The most recent event in life of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia was the appointment of Mons. ThDr. Jan Babjak, SJ to residential eparch of the eparchy of Prešov. He was ordained by the Holy Father on 6th of January 2003 in basilica St. Peter in Vatican.³¹ The enthronization took place on 18.1.2003 in the cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Presov.³²

Holy Father John Paul II. beatified the bishop Pavol Peter Gojdič, OSBM and the religious priest Metod Dominik Trčka, CSsR. on 4 th. November 2004 on the St. Peters Square in Rome.³³ Holy Father also beatified the bishop Vasiľ Hopko on 14 th. September 2003 in Bratislava in Slovakia.³⁴ The relics of blessed martyr Pavol Peter Gojdič, OSMB and martyr Vasiľ Hopko are in the Chapels of Cathedral St. John Baptist in Prešov.

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²⁹ HRIC, J. – ŠTURÁK, P.: *Prešovské biskupstvo*. Prešov : DINO 1998, p. 120-121.

³⁰ VASIL, C.: *Gréckokatolíci – Dejiny – Osudy – Osobnosti*. Košice : Byzant 2000, p. 142.

³¹ *Nový biskup v Prešove*. In: Obežník Gréckokatolíckeho biskupstva Prešov, č. 5, december 2002, p. 2.

³² *Nový biskup v Prešove*. In: Obežník Gréckokatolíckeho biskupstva Prešov, č. 5, december 2002, p. 2.

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