

Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia and its Martyrs

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Since the establishment toward the present

Greek-Catholic Church¹ in Slovakia is a successor of the spiritual heritage and message of Saints Cyril and Method. Representatives as well as members of this church point out as much as possible that they come from historically ancient cultural region of eastern Christianity.² The first favor shown to the Greek-Catholics in Slovakia by the pope was already at the time of their genesis. In 869 Pope Hadrian II consecrated liturgical books brought to Rome by the holy brothers Cyril and Method. By this act and favour of Pope Hadrian II Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia has had a holy liturgy in the language of the people 1100 years earlier than all other nations. As the Slavic Language became reputable, the Slavs of Great Moravia (our ancestors) had included among the culturally advanced European nations.

On September 22, 1818 Pope Pius VII has established the Eparchy of Presov by the Bull *Relata Semper*.³ Two separate units had allocated from

¹ The nomenclature "Greek-Catholic" had been stabilized during the reign of Maria Theresa. Historical origins of the nomenclature reflects the essential features: ceremony brought by Greek missionaries has the Byzantine origin, while at the same time it is expressing that it is the Catholic Church, general and united with Rome, strictly speaking "unseparated" from Rome. It is Catholic Church of Byzantine-Slavic rite expanded not only in Slovakia but also in other countries (Poland, Hungary, Bohemia and Moravia, Ukraine, Belarus, Romania, USA, Canada...), while in relation to Rome these are act by their own. Compare: *Kto sú gréckokatolíci?* http://www.grkat.nfo.sk/Poprad/kto_su_greckokatolici.htm (04.08.2005).

² Compare: HIRKA, J.: *Svätý Otec v Prešove*. In: *PREŠOV sídlo gréckokatolíckeho biskupstva na Slovensku*. Prešov : Opal, s.r.o., 1995, p. 4.

³ Compare: ČITBAJ, F.: *Pápeži a gréckokatolíci*. In: *PREŠOV sídlo gréckokatolíckeho biskupstva na Slovensku*. Prešov : Opal, s.r.o., 1995, p. 8.

the Eparchy of Presov – Apostolic Exarchate with its seat in Prague (in 1996) and the Apostolic Exarchate with its seat in Kosice (in 1997). On 30 January 2008, the Holy Father Benedict XVI has established a Greek-Catholic metropolis with the seat in Presov. The previous Presov residential bishop Msgr. ThDr. Ján Babjak SJ, PhD. has been appointed for the first Greek-Catholic Archbishop and Metropolitan of Presov.

At the same day the Pope promoted the Apostolic Exarchate of Kosice to Eparchy of Kosice. The previous Apostolic Exarch Milan Chatur, CSSR has been appointed to first residential Bishop of Kosice.

By the separation from the Presov Eparchy the Holy Father Benedict XVI has established also the new Greek-Catholic Eparchy with its seat in Bratislava – Eparchy of Bratislava. Msgr. Peter Rusnak has been appointed for the first Greek-Catholic Bratislava residential bishop. By this new canon arrangement of the Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia, the Holy Father Benedict XVI has completed the 190 years long phase of Presov Eparchy history. At the same time it is also a confirmation of more than 1100 years history of the Greek-Catholics in the territory of current Slovakia, which unfolds since the mission of St Slavic Apostles Cyril and Method.

On April 28, 1950 the Greek-Catholic Church in the former Czechoslovakia had been outlawed by totalitarian regime and could not serve publicly. Her bishops, priests, but also many of the faithful laity were imprisoned, persecuted and dragged into exile. During those years many have died, but remained faithful to God, toward the Catholic Church and toward their conscience. Greek-Catholic Church was restored only after 18 years by the government regulation from Jun 13, 1968⁴. The suffering of this Church has reflected also in the decimated number of believers, however over the years their number grows thanks the grace of God and quality pastoral ministry of priests.

The ancient tradition – that the Catholics of the Eastern Rite in Slovakia had been an integral part of the whole nation already at the time of Great Moravia, and that they have adopted Christianity and developed it by the holy brothers Cyril and Method – survived until today.⁵

Greek-Catholic Church is part of the Catholic Church. United in the Holy Spirit with the Catholic Church, this local church has its own hierarchy, liturgy, discipline with the same faith and sacraments. It retains its own rite and cultural heritage which is reflected in the way of life.⁶

⁴ Institutionally, Greek-Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia began its work on July 17, 1968 by the establishment of the bishop's office, which was temporarily in Kosice.

⁵ *Nové kánonické usporiadanie Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi na Slovensku*. <http://www.grkatpo.sk/spravny/?zobrazit=text&id=931> (06.06.2008).

⁶ Compare: HIRKA, J.: *Svätý Otec v Prešove*. In: *PREŠOV sídlo gréckokatolíckeho biskupstva na Slovensku*. Prešov : Opal, s.r.o., 1995, p. 5. ISBN 80-967375-9-7.

Introduction

„If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.“ (John 15,20).

„But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony.“ (Luke 21,12-13)

These are the words of Jesus Christ through which he suggested that the Church will be pursued. And indeed. Two thousands years of Church history are proof of it. For centuries Christians have testified their firm belief in God and fidelity to the Church. Often times it has costed them much sacrifice, humiliation – many underwent even martyrdom. However they do not lacked courage, steady love, mind focused on the eternal beatitude that is worth of any sacrifice.

Every period of the Church history is characterized by something special, which also marks the future times, includes such figures that are remembered by many people even today. Not so ancient twentieth century in which the Greek-Catholic Church has survived the extremely turbulent times of persecution, destruction and rebirth, is not the exception.

In the twentieth century Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia (until 1993 in Czechoslovakia) had to deal with violent oppression, the dark times and subsequent destruction. But thanks to brave people, personalities of the Christian life, but also self-sacrificing believers it could go out again into the light of the truth and show itself in the new steadfast strength. The fruit of sufferings and violent gore of many martyrs can be clearly seen and experienced also today.

After all the hardship the Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia received from the Heavenly Father martyrs who are worthy to be followed. Blessed Presov residential Bishop Pavol Peter Gojdič, OSBM and his auxiliary bishop ThDr. Vasil Hopko are one of many who did not fear to face the secular power and defend their faith even at the cost of their own life. Their testimony is an example for all those who long for truth and unity, as the attributes required for the work of ecumenism.

Blessed martyr Pavol Peter Gojdič, OSBM

In the gallery of significant personalities of Slovak Catholic world a honest place belongs to bishop martyr P.P. Gojdič. The personality of this man has left deep traces in the historical consciousness of the Slovak people.⁷

P.P. Gojdič was born on July 17, 1888 in the village Ruské Pekľany within the family of Greek-Catholic priest⁸ Štefan Gojdič and mother Anna,

⁷ Compare: ŠTURÁK, P.: *Otec biskup Pavol Gojdič, OSBM (1888 – 1960)*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 1997, p. 26.

née Gerberyová. In baptism on July 23, 1888 he was named Peter. He received a basic education in Cigelka, near Bardejov, where his father Štefan was transferred to parish, later in Bardejov and Presov.⁹ He continued his studies at a grammar school in Prešov, which he successfully finished by leaving examination in 1907.

Following God's voice, he started to study theology in Presov. Because of the excellent results he was sent for further studies to Budapest. Already as a seminarian at the seminar he received from his spiritual a kind of life navigation: "Life is not difficult, but very serious." This became a kind of directive accompanying him during whole his life. During his studies in Budapest one of the teachers, Dr. Ján Dudek, told about him these prophetic words: „This man will once become a bishop of Presov.“¹⁰

After finishing his study, on August 27 he was ordained to priest by Bishop dr. Ján Vály in Prešov. He served as chaplain next to his father. Later he went through a number of services at Greek-Catholic episcopal office in Prešov, and since 1919 he became a director of the episcopal office. On July 20, 1922 he entered the Order of St Basil the Great at the Černečej Mountain near Mukachevo, where during the covering on January 27, 1923 he took the name Paul. This was done because of his modesty, humility and desire to live in asceticism and so to serve Lord God.

God's will however was different and it predetermined him to the role of service as a bishop. On September 14, 1926 he was appointed to apostolic administrator of the Presov Eparchy. During his installation for the administrator he announced program of his apostolate: „With the help of God I want to be the father of orphans, the assistant of poor and comforter of those who are in sorrow“.

On March 7, 1927 Pope Pius XI appointed him to a bishop. Episcopal ordination took place on the feast of Annunciation on March 25, 1927 in the Basilica of St. Clement in Rome.¹¹

During a private audience with Pope Pius XI newly ordained bishop P.P. Gojdič received breast cross with the words: „This cross is just a light symbol of all those great and heavy crosses that God will send to you, my son, in your new position of Episcopal service!“ Prophetic words had deeply touched the heart of Bishop Pavol. And indeed the cross has be-

⁸ In Greek-Catholic church the celibacy is optional (voluntary).

⁹ Compare: ŠTURÁK, P.: *Otec biskup Pavol Gojdič, OSBM (1888 – 1960)*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 1997, p. 28.

¹⁰ ŠTURÁK, P.: *Biskup Pavol Gojdič OSBM – Martýr Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*. In: KOL. AUTOROV: *Boli solou i svetlom*. Trnava : Spolok svätého Vojtecha, 2001, p. 57.

¹¹ Compare: ŠTURÁK, P.: *Otec biskup Pavol Gojdič, OSBM (1888 – 1960)*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 1997, p. 52.

come a kind of the motto of his life, with patience he has took it on him and bore up heroically to Golgotha. 12

On his apostolic journey he has chose a bishops slogan: „God is Love, let us love him.“

As bishop he contributed to the uplift of the spiritual life of priests and believers. Children and youth took the special place in the heart of Bishop P.P. Gojdič. He has regularly visited colleges and seminary. He also often used to visit the orphanage in Prešov which he himself has founded.¹³

He took special care about publishing spiritual literature, magazines and books. Due to his gracious, thoughtful and charitable relationship toward people he received recognition and was called „the man of golden heart“.

On April 13, 1939 Bishop P.P. Gojdič was appointed as Apostolic Administrator of Mukachevo Apostolic Administratory in Slovakia. Within the difficult conditions of the Slovak State during World War II, he became a thorn in the eye of government officials, therefore he asked for the abdication. Pope Pius XII appreciated his previous bishop service and did not receive his abdication. Instead of it he designated him for a residential bishop of Presov. On August 8, 1940 he was solemnly enthroned in Presov and subsequently on January 15, 1946 confirmed in the jurisdiction of the Greek-Catholics throughout Czechoslovakia.

The development of religious and spiritual life in the Eparchy, which had been developing according to personal example and zeal of Bishop P.P. Gojdič, was interrupted in 1948 when Communists came to power. Their ideological orientation predetermined a fight especially against the Greek-Catholic Church. Bishop P.P. Gojdič rejected an effort – supported by Communist Party and state power – regarding transfer of Greek-Catholics to the Orthodoxy, although he knew that by this he will expose himself to the persecution and imprisonment. Gradually they isolated him from the clergy and faithful. Even when he was exposed to great pressure to renounce the Catholic faith and breaks the unity with the pope, he refused all tempting offers and said: “I sacrifice all my property and residence, but I will not betray my faith under any circumstances as I want my soul to be saved”.¹⁴

On April 28, 1950 state power outlawed the Greek-Catholic Church, it forbided its activity. Bishop P.P. Gojdič was arrested and interned. Thus began his calvary through many prisons in the former Czechoslovakia. He was imprisoned in Báč, in Prague at Ruzyne where he was imprisoned in solitary confinement, in Valdice, Ilava and Leopoldov. On January 11-15,

¹² Compare: POTAŠ, M.: *Dar lásky*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2001, p. 67.

¹³ ŠTURÁK P.: Biskup Pavol Gojdič OSBM – Martýr Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi. In: KOL. AUTOROV: *Boli solou i svetlom*. Trnava : Spolok svätého Vojtecha, 2001, p. 72.

¹⁴ Compare: DURLÁK, M. (zost.): *Moleben k blaboslavenému biskupovi-mučeníkovi Pavlovi Petrovi Gojdičovi*, OSBM. Prešov : Gréckokatolícke biskupstvo, 2001, p. 28.

1951 he was sentenced for treason to life imprisonment, paying a penalty of two hundred thousand crowns and deprivation of civil rights. He had been humiliated, exposed to physical and psychological coercion, but he never complained, never asked for benefits. He used every while for praying and he secretly served holy liturgy. In 1953, due to the amnesty issued by President A. Zápotocký, his sentence had been changed from life imprisonment to twenty five years of imprisonment. Other applications were rejected.

Father Bishop P.P. Gojdič could get out of heavy prison to freedom if he would denied his fidelity toward the Church and Holy Father. He had different offers for it. Evidence of this is also the following event: “In prison in Ruzyně he was tooked from his cell to the representative room, where he was accepted by the uniformed high officer. He was told that from this room he will go straight to Presov if he is willing to become the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Czechoslovakia. Bishop refused this request with the excuse that this would be a terrible sin against God, that it would be treason toward the Holy Father as well as toward his own conscience and faithful.”

Even in the hardest moments he submitted himself to the will of God, as his words witness: “Verily I do not know whether it would be worth to replace the crown of martyrdom for the two or three years of freedom. But I will leave it to dear God, let him decide on.” His last prison was Leopoldov where he received prison number 681.

On the occasion of his 70s birthday he was sent a telegram to prison from Pope Pius XII. He assured him that he does not forget his heroic son. For father Bishop it was really one of the most beautiful days in jail.

The health of father Bishop was becoming still more shattered. His great desire was to die fixed with sacraments on the day of his birthday. Both his desire were fulfilled. He confessed to Roman-Catholic priest Alojz Vrána who was moved to the hospital room in Leopoldov prison. The chalice of suffering of Bishop P.P. Gojdič was gradually filling. Eye-witness of the last moments of his life was his co-lag – male nurse František Ondruška who recorded testimony about them. He confirmed that the desire of father Bishop was satisfied as he died on July 17, 1960, so on his birthday at the age of 72 years in a prison hospital in Leopoldov. Subsequently, he was buried without any honors at the prison cemetery in the grave without a name, under the prison number 681.

Following the release of the socio-political conditions in Czechoslovakia in 1968, state authorities after many delays have allowed exhumation of mortal remnants of Bishop P.P. Gojdič. Exhumation itself took place on October 29, 1968 at cemetery in Leopoldov and bodily remnants were then transferred to Presov. Due to the order of normalization offices after the Soviet occupation they had to be moved into the crypt of the Greek-

Catholic cathedral church of St. John the Baptist in Presov. On May 15, 1990 they were stored in a sarcophagus in the chapel of the cathedral.

Rehabilitation and beatification of Bishop P.P. Gojdič

Bishop P.P. Gojdič was rehabilitated by court on September 27, 1990. He was honored posthumously with the Order of T.G. Masaryk II. Class and with Pribina's Cross I. Class.

Pope John Paul II prayed at the tomb of this Bishop - Martyr in the cathedral chapel while visiting Greek-Catholics in Presov during his historic visit in Slovakia on July 2, 1995.¹⁵

The diocesan phase of the process of beatification of Bishop Martyr P.P. Gojdič was officially opened on July 17, 1998 in the chapel of the Greek-Catholic bishopric in Presov. Although he left no monographic work, his pastoral letters, religious reflections and meditations, excerpts from speeches and preaching, but also personal example are overtime.

The desire of Greek Catholic believers in Slovakia became finally fulfilled after years of hopes, prayers and efforts. The date November 4, 2001 permanently entered into the history of Greek-Catholics in Slovakia. Bishop P.P. Gojdič was declared blessed martyr for the faith by Pope John Paul II at St. Peter's Square in Rome. It was the first beatification in the history of the Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia.

Joyful event continued on November 17, 2001 with transfering his relics from the city hall in Prešov into the Cathedral of St John the Baptist, where they are stored in the Chapel of St Cross within the glass sarcophagus.

The message of bishop martyr P.P. Gojdič: "I am sure that truth will ultimately triumph over the lie and love overcomes hate. I do not hate my enemies. I would like to bring them closer to Christ, of course not by violence or lie but through love and truth". (...) "Our current sufferings will not break nor separate us from the true church and the love of Christ. Contrariwise, persecution and sufferings only strengthen our faith and bring us closer to Christ and his Church."¹⁶

Father Bishop P.P. Gojdič richly fulfilled his life until his martyrish death and when the supreme authority of the Church recognized it, he became blessed. Example of his life became reinforcement for many who suffered for their faith, loved their ceremony and did not deny their faithfulness. His example is becoming reinforcement also to nowadays world. The greatness of his personality rested in his inexpressible modesty and his childish relation to God. His faith and loyalty have exceeded the ordinary heroism.

¹⁵ Compare: Dancák, F.: *GOJDIČ, Pavol, Peter, OSBM*. <http://www.zoe.sk/?osobnosti&meno=GOJDI%C8%2C+Pavol%2C+Peter%2C+OSBM> (07.07.2008).

¹⁶ Biskupi na Prešovskom stolci. In. *Slovo. Časopis Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*. Trnava : SSV, 1995, č. 7, p. 11.

It should be noted that on January 27, 2008 in Bratislava blessed Bishop P.P. Gojdič was awarded the title *Righteous among the Nations* (Yad Vashem) for the selfless rescue of Jewish citizens during World War II. This is the very first bishop among the 22 000 honorees in the world, who has been awarded this highest honor of the state of Israel, awarded to people of non-Jewish origin. By selflessly rescuing Jewish citizens during the Holocaust he showed real humanity and holiness of life.

Blessed martyr ThDr. Vasil Hopko

Bishop ThDr. Vasil Hopko unquestionably belongs, alongside to Bishop P.P. Gojdič, among major figures of the Eparchy of Presov. Through his fidelity to the Holy Father, love toward people and pastoral work he showed that the words of St. Paul apply also for him: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4, 7).¹⁷

V. Hopko was born on April 21, 1904 in Hrabské, within the the family of a poor farmer Vasil Hopko and Anna née Petrenková, as the youngest among five children. He was baptized on April 24, 1904.

Father served as a sacristan and bell-founder in the parish.¹⁸ In the Parish Chronicle p. 13 we can read about the tragic incident that has deeply struck into the life of a young Vasil: "On July 6, 1905 a great storm had spined along the village. Citizen Vasil Hopko went to ring on the tower, directly under the bells. Lightning struck the tower and killed him. Citizens built him a memorial stone in the local cemetery."¹⁹

In 1908 Vasil's mother left for work to the U.S. She entrusted children to her parents, whose she supported financially from the U.S. On September 1, 1910 a six-year old Vasil began to attend a Greek-Catholic municipal school in Hrabské. When he was eight, mother's brother Petrenko Demeter, Greek-Catholic priest in Oľšavica, took him to himself.

Vasil received basic education in the school with Hungarian educational language in Bardejov. He continued in his study at Lutheran grammar school in Presov, where he graduated with honors in 1923.

After finishing grammar school in 1924 and after making a decision to study theology, he entered a Theological college and seminary in Presov and so fulfilled his desire to dedicate his life to the altar.²⁰

He completed his theological studies in 1928. Mother wanted him to leave to the U.S. but then he became seriously ill. Mother's money that

¹⁷ Compare: VOROŇÁK, J.: Vladyka ThDr. Vasil Hopko (1904 – 1976). In: BABJAK, J. – KUŠ-NÍR, P.: *Zostali verní I. Osudy gréckokatolíckych kňazov*. Košice : Byzant s. r. o., 1997, p. 22.

¹⁸ Compare: DANCÁK, F.: *Da vsi jedino budut – Aby všeci jedno boli*. Prešov : Petra 2002, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Kronika farnosti Hrabské* (1968 – 2006), p. 13.

²⁰ Compare: BORZA, P.: ThDr. Vasil Hopko a jeho vzťah k Vysokej škole bohosloveckej a semináru v Prešove. In.: *Zborník prednášok z vedeckej konferencie. Blaboslavenyj biskup Vasil Hopko (1904 – 1976)*. Prešov : Petra, 2004, p. 22.

was prepared to travel to the U.S. was spent on doctors. Later he mentioned: "But all this was God's will because God wanted me to stay in Native County."

After healing he has asked the Bishop of Presov P.P. Gojdič for a sacrament of the priesthood. He received this sacrament on February 3, 1929 in Presov from the hands of Bishop P.P. Gojdič. He celebrated his first holy liturgy on February 15, 1929 in Blažov.²¹ He was appointed as administrator of Pakostov parish while he was assigned to Prague where many Greek-Catholics from around Czechoslovakia lived then. Later when parish in Prague was eriged, the bishop P.P. Gojdič appointed V. Hopko as its first pastor.

His performance in Prague was multifaceted: he devoted himself to youth, workers, students, unemployed, orphans.²² He was known for his efforts regarding the "unification of believers" and for his testimony: "*I did not come for Russians, nor for the Ukrainians or for the Ruthenians, but for the Greek-Catholics.*" During his pastoral work in Prague he was particularly involved in the Association of St. Rafael, which was set up to protect migrants. Here in Prague he met – after 22 years – with his mother who returned to homeland after hard work in America.

He served in Prague parish until February 14, 1936. In the same year due to an active pastoral work he was awarded the title *Monsignor*. From September 15, 1936 to August 31, 1941 he served as spiritual in the seminary in Presov, where he focused on spiritual formation of Greek-Catholic priests' sapling.

Division of Czechoslovakia in 1939 made it impossible for him to continue in doctoral studies at Charles University in Prague, and so he completed his study at Theological Faculty in Bratislava. In Bratislava he went through rigorous exams from dogmatic theology, law and history. He successfully defended a dissertation thesis entitled "Nature of St. Paul based on his epistles", and on April 20, 1940 he was graduated on a doctor of theology.²³

Since September 1, 1941 he was a Bishop's Secretary and since 1943 he taught moral and pastoral theology at the Graduate Theological School in Prešov.

Since 1943, according to assignment of the bishop P.P. Gojdič, he organized support for Ukrainian refugees, especially Greek-Catholic priests with their families, and he continued in this effort even after 1945. From

²¹ Compare: BORZA, P. Blahoslavený Vasíl Hopko Prešovský pomocný biskup (1904 – 1976). Prešov : Petra, 2003, p. 36.

²² Compare: KUBÍK, F.: Blahoslavený biskup Vasíl Hopko a mládež. In: BOHÁČ, V.: *Reflexia jednoty v diele a pôsobení blahoslaveného biskupa Vasíla Hopka (1904-1976) v kontexte eurointegračného procesu*. Prešov : GTF PU Prešov, 2008, p. 70.

²³ BORZA, P. *Blahoslavený Vasíl Hopko Prešovský pomocný biskup (1904 – 1976)* Prešov : Petra, p. 22.

May 1946 to January 1947 he worked as the editor responsible for Greek-Catholic fortnightly *Blabovistnik*. Between the years 1946 - 1948 he wrote and published a number of spiritual books: *Greko-katolíčeskaja Cerkov, Christos posredi nas, Christos v nas, Christos za nas žertvujetsja*.²⁴ He also participated in the preparation of anniversary book on the 60 Anniversary of the birth of Bishop P.P. Gojdič, entitled *J. E. Pavel Gojdič ČSVV, jepiskop prjaševskij*.

His literary talent was not confined only to the printed word. He has performed on various occasions, mostly in academies and lectures. Thus he gained a reputation of an excellent preacher, publicist and spiritual writer.

Religious and social situation in Czechoslovakia after 1945 started to deteriorate. Anticipation of the political changes in the republic as well as many duties led the Bishop P.P. Gojdič to ask the Holy See for an auxiliary bishop. The Vatican recognized the validity of the request of Bishop P.P. Gojdič and after careful consideration – through Bull of Pope Pius XII from January 2, 1947 – ThDr. V. Hopko was reported to be appointed as the auxiliary bishop

The Eparchy of Prešov thus had for the first time in its history an auxiliary bishop. He was ordained by Bishop P.P. Gojdič in Presov on May 11, 1947. The Prague Archbishop Dr. Jozef Beran and Košice bishop Jozef Čársky were the co-ordinators. As his episcopal slogan he had chosen the words of Jesus Christ's High Priest prayer (John 17, 21): "May they be one in us".²⁵

He did not choose these words as a decoration on the episcopal coat-of-arms but as a commitment, direction and purpose of his arcipastoral activity and whole life.

The new auxiliary bishop did not disappoint the hopes which were put into it. He complied with all regulations of residential bishop P.P. Gojdič. He spent all his strength and intellectual gifts to meet them; he followed him with dignity and bravery.

During visitations in parishes he often admonished and encouraged believers to fulfill their religious obligations and he began to prepare them for the difficult times that occurred when Communists took power in their hands in 1948.

After the communist coup on February 25, 1948 the ominous clouds began to move also over the Eparchy of Presov. Since July 1, 1949 the regular monthly professorial salary of Bishop V. Hopko was stopped according to the hint of state authorities due to "the "negative attitude towards the state's Democratic establishment."²⁶

²⁴ Compare: Životopis prešovského sväticeho biskupa ThDr. Vasila Hopku. In: *Slovo. Časopis Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*. Prešov : Petra, september 2003, roč. 35, p. 20

²⁵ Compare: DANCÁK, F.: *Da vsi jedino budut – Aby všeci jedno boli*. Prešov : Petra 2002, p. 12.

²⁶ *Životopis prešovského sväticeho biskupa ThDr. Vasila Hopku*. In: *Slovo. Časopis Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*. Prešov : Petra, september 2003, roč. 35, p. 21.

The Communist regime escalated repression and terror. Since December 1, 1949 agents of Slovak Office for Religious Affairs were inserted into the episcopal offices. In 1950, on the feast of Nativity of Our Lord according to the Julian calendar, a commission for the "return-action" – that few months received infamous name "Action P"²⁷ – was set up apart from this office. On March 27, 1950 the isolation of both Greek-Catholic Bishops - Bishop P.P. Gojdič and V. Hopko was ordered, based on the resolution of KV KSS in Prešov.

Bishop V. Hopko was at each step accompanied by a member of the StB. He did not miss neither during his visits in seminary nor on the lessons of moral and pastoral theology, which the bishop taught. On April 28, 1950 so called "Presov sobor" took place in Prešov – it meant the actual destruction of the Greek-Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. Sobor was the last phase of implementation of the action "P".²⁸

The Greek-Catholic Church was outlawed by "Prešov sobor" and so the calvary through many prisons began for the bishop.

He refused violent conversion to Orthodox Church and so since the end of April 1950 he was in house arrest. During the night on May 15, 1950 he was with other major representatives of Greek-Catholic Church moved into detention convent in Báč. Stay in Báč did not last long and was replaced by internment in the Franciscan monastery in Hlohovec.

There he was arrested on October 18, 1950 and after more than a year of a very cruel investigation he was convicted for the crime of treason and spying by the State court in Bratislava on October 24, 1951. The content of judgement was following: 15 years of imprisonment, a penalty of 20 thousand crowns, loss of civil rights for 10 years and confiscation of personal property.²⁹

Sentenced bishop V. Hopko began his hard journey through prisons in previous Czechoslovakia. He was twentytwo times transported, five times was in Leopoldov, twice in Ilava, four times in Valdice. He was ex-piating undeserved punishment also in Mirov and in Ruzyně. In prison he executed various jobs; he produced cellophane bags, coated mattresses,

²⁷ *Action P* – The process of forced conversion of Slovak and Ruthenian Greek-Catholics to the Orthodox Church, which culminated in April 28, 1950 by so called *Great sobor* in Presov. That day the Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia officially ceased to exist, its temples and estates passed into the ownership of the Orthodox Church and the priests and believers who remained faithful to their faith were persecuted. – Compare: VNUK, F.: *Príručný slovník kresťanstva*. Bratislava : SMARAGD, 2003, p. 18.

²⁸ Compare: BORZA, P. *Blaboslavený Vasil Hopko Prešovský pomocný biskup (1904 – 1976)*. Prešov : Petra, 2003, p. 62.

²⁹ Compare: Životopis prešovského svätiačeho biskupa ThDr. Vasilu Hopku. In: *Slovo. Časopis Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*. Prešov : Petra, september 2003, roč. 35, p. 21.

dam sacks on flour, produced twine, pins and jewelery.³⁰ In addition he was tortured by various prison methods. They tortured him and behaved to him as if he was not even human. In Ruzyne near Prague he spent 122 days in solitary confinement. In the cell he could just walk, sitting down was allowed only when he was eating. Piece of bread and a glass of water were the only food at that time. At night they wake him up and shined with reflector lights directly into the eyes, or they suddenly splashed him with cold water. On commandment he had to do knee bends. Every day torturers have invented another kind of torture. Later on he used to comment in this regard: “What I have survived, I do not wish to anyone within the world.” (...) “I prayed that I had power and remained faithful to the Catholic Church.” He himself described his suffering as college of humility that will teach man to suffer, work, serve and keep silent.³¹

Prison system permanently marked his health. Prison management was afraid that he could die, so in 1964 they suspended the sentence and until beginning of 1968 he lived in a charitable house in Osek in northern Bohemia, where he was still watched by members of the StB.

After the socio-political changes in connection with the “Prague Spring” the activity of Greek-Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was renewed by a government regulation No. 70/1968 from June 13, 1968. Bishop Vasil Hopko has actively participated in church renewal. However normalized communist regime did not allow Hopko to carry out the administration of the Presov Eparchy. On April 2, 1969 he was appointed as consecrating bishop. Despite the age and broaken health he carried out also this mission with all responsibly. He strengthened the believers, consecrated priests as a good shepherd, keeping the tasks assigned to him. However he was not fully rehabilitated. State power remained to harass bishop V. Hopko and pressured him thus to restrict him and complicate his life. But he did not betray the Church even at the cost of endangering his life.

Provided with sacraments he died of consequences of imprisonment on July 23, 1976 in Presov aged 72 years. Funeral ceremonies were carried out on July 29, 1976 by Yugoslav Greek-Catholic Bishop Joachim Segedi with the participation of Greek-Catholic Ordinary Ján Hirka, Roman-Catholic bishops, priests and the believers. His bodily relics were deposited in the crypt of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Presov.

³⁰ Compare: BORZA, P. *Blaboslavený Vasil Hopko Prešovský pomocný biskup (1904 – 1976)*. Prešov : Petra, 2003, p. 65.

³¹ Compare: DANCÁK, F.: *Da vsi jedino budut – Aby všetci jedno boli*. Prešov : Petra 2002, p.14.; KARDIS, K. *Spoleczno – etyczne podstawy wspólnoty europejskiej* In: Europa, Gospodarka, Media. Red. T. Guz. Lublin – Tomaszów Lubelski, 2007, p. 89-99.

Rehabilitation and beatification of Bishop V. Hopko

On September 24, 2001 the tribunal – that guided the exhumation, legal recognition and relocation of the relics of God's servant ThDr. Vasil Hopko – was appointed. During the exhumation within the process of beatification an excess presence of arsenic poison in his bodily relics was confirmed by the toxicologic examination; according to analysis the arsenic had to be administered to him for a longer time.

On July 7, 2003 in the presence of the Holy Father John Paul II a decree on martyrdom of God's servant Vasil Hopko, auxiliary bishop of Presov, was declared.

During the third pastoral visit of Pope John Paul II in Slovakia on the feast of Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on September 14, 2003 in Bratislava – Petržalka, His Holiness declared Bishop V. Hopko as blessed. Greek-Catholic Church so has next blessed bishop in heaven.

Joyful event continued on September 20 2003 by transferring the relics of blessed Vasil Hopko from a space in front of the theater of Záborský to the cathedral of St John the Baptist in Presov. They are stored in a sarcophagus in the chapel of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul.

The message of Blessed Bishop-Martyr Vasil Hopko for us is very clear. In hard times he maintained fidelity to Christ and to the Church. For us, Bishop V. Hopko is a model of a man who loved the Church and had her spirit. For us, his life attitude is an example how to respond correctly to hostile attitudes toward the Church and do not separate Jesus Christ from his Church.³²

Contribution of the blessed

"The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings, and their prayer today. They contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth. When they entered into the joy of their Master, they were "put in charge of many things." Their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world."³³

Blessed P.P. Gojdič and blessed V. Hopko is a great gift for the entire Greek-Catholic Church in Slovakia as well as for the whole Church – because within sanctity there are no borders. Exalted to worship of the altars they are clear models that have to be followed in our journey to salvation, but they are also powerful intercessors before God. "They have fulfilled

³² Bulletin: *Vasil Hopko 1904 – 1976. „Da vsi jedino budut. Blahorečenie 14. septembra 2003. Bratislava.* Prešov : Gréckokatolícke biskupstvo, 2003.

³³ Katechizmus Katolíckej cirkvi, Trnava : SSV, 1999, čl. 2683.

God's will, reached their highest goal – the heaven. They are for us – people who still walk on earthly paths of life – a great model and encouragement. They tell us that they too resemble to us in our difficulties, but those did not break or sicken them. They encourage us to endurance and zeal in doing good things. They also remind us the truth: what costs us nothing really costs nothing. They are heroes of the spirit because they learnt to control their passions, their tastes, feelings and other virtues of soul and their victory is already definitive and ever lasting.”³⁴

Their perseverance in suffering and martyrdom in prison are the largest gift for the whole Church. God's servant Pope John Paul II evaluated this gift of their silent suffering as follows: “Greek-Catholic community came out of this temptation renewed and strengthened also thanks to the testimony and the blood of many martyrs [...].The suffering of Bishop Hopko and martyrdom of Bishop Gojdič is a valuable contribution to the treasury of the Church in favor of ecumenism”. New blessed persons are great examples also for present times. They overcame hatred by the fact that they did not deny Holy Father, remained faithful and persevere in suffering, which culminated in their martyrdom and yet they shined the goodness of heart and love.³⁵

Attacks against the Church are also in present times. They are kept by other, refined and more dangerous ways, in order to present the Church as an survived institution, that no longer has anything to say to today's world, where her views are already non-modern (abortion, euthanasia).³⁶ Present times need such heroes to represent a model example to young people. Through personal and confidential interview with the blessed ones in prayer, we can get much physical or spiritual good. Communication with blessed ones on the basis of living faith will enrich our lives and help us to achieving the ultimate goal – the heaven that is the completion and crown of a person's life.³⁷

Respect for our blessed martyrs is a challenge for us, so we follow their lives and ask them for their intercession in front of God in regard of our concerns and difficulties. Blessed bishops-martyrs P.P. Gojdič and V.

³⁴ BABJAK, J.: Čo nám chce Cirkev povedať cez blahoslavených a svätých. In: Zborník prednášok z vedeckej konferencie. *Blahoslavený biskup Vasil Hopko (1904 – 1976)*. Prešov : Petra, 2004, p. 18.

³⁵ PETRÍK, L.: *Desiate výročie návštevy Svätého Otca v Prešove*. In: Gréckokatolícky kalendár 2005, Košice: Byzant, s.r.o., 2004, p. 33-34.

³⁶ Compare: ŠTURÁK, P.: Blahorečenia: Pavel P. Gojdič, Metod D. Trčka, Vasil Hopko. In: *Theologos: Teologická revue GTF PU v Prešove*. Prešov : Petra, roč. 6, 2005, č. 1, p. 37-38.

³⁷ Compare: BABJAK, J.: Čo nám chce Cirkev povedať cez blahoslavených a svätých. In: Zborník prednášok z vedeckej konferencie. *Blahoslavený biskup Vasil Hopko (1904 – 1976)*. Prešov : Petra, 2004, p. 21.

Hopko are a great challenge for us, reinforcement of our faith and clear testimony of loyalty and love toward God, the Church and Holy Father.³⁸

Instead of conclusion

The words of the God's Servant Pope John Paul II that were spoken during his visit in Slovakia on July 2, 1995 in Presov have been fulfilled:

"We all remember the dramatic situation in the recent past, when the powers of ideology that is in contrary to human dignity and freedom, condemned your religious community to extinction. But God had put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted those of low who were humiliated (Luke 1, 52) because they were sympathetic to each other in love of Christ. (...) Greek-Catholic community came out of this temptation renewed and strengthened also thanks to the testimony and the blood of many martyrs. Live link of this is the faith of large number of lay people, religious men and women, priests and spiritual pastors. Just remember the suffering of Bishop Vasil Hopko and martyrdom of Bishop Pavol Gojdič. On the threshold of the third millennium it is a valuable contribution that put your community in favor of ecumenism."³⁹

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³⁸ Compare: PETRÍK, L.: Tri nové relikviáre. In: *Slovo. Časopis gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*. Prešov : Gréckokatolícke biskupstvo a Petra, n. o., 2006, roč. 38, č. 3, p. 6.

³⁹ Pomocný biskup ThDr. Vasil HOPKO. http://www.grkatpo.sk/hopko/?zobrazit=ziv_sk (12.06.2008). Compare: KARDIS, K.: *Ján Pavol II. a morálne základy Európy*. In. Sapienciálny charakter antropológie Jana Pavla II. a európska integrácia. Ed. P. Dancak. Prešov, 2007, p. 254-267.

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