

COMMUNISM / The story of the Slovak priests who made the USSR their mission

Angelo Bonaguro

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The pastor of Nitra, Peter Murdza (1954-2009), died shortly before Christmas. His story is recounted in the book *Zapas o nádej* (Struggle for Hope) a collection of biographies of six priest-friends, clandestinely ordained in Slovakia during communist totalitarianism, all members of the Fatima Community. The unique aspect of this initiative of the Slovak underground church was that its main purpose was to help Christians in the USSR, despite already having serious problems with the communist regime in their homeland.

The history of the community began in 1943 with the arrival of Father Kolakovic in Slovakia, who fled from Yugoslavia, who began to develop an apostolate among high school students in Bratislava. Two boys were particularly drawn to the priest, Vlado Jukl and Silvo Krcmery. Vlado recalls: "I listened to his lectures on philosophy and theology which helped me both spiritually and intellectually. His main intention was the evangelization of Russia: this is what he lived for and prepared us for ... Kolakovic foresaw what would happen after the victory of the Red Army. He taught us some fundamental things to endure the interrogations; we were also tested. He chose a student and "interrogated" him."

What seemed like a game to students within a few years became a harsh reality. After the communist coup of 1948, in fact, even in Slovakia the Church was subject to the regime and any missionary activity was considered illegal.

After the dark decades of Stalinism, in the early seventies, a group of young people interested in the message of Fatima gathered around Silvo and Vlado, who had returned to freedom after long years of detention. In July 1974 the two friends, along with Rudolf Fiby and Eugen Valovic in their twenties, founded a stable group whose members took the promises of poverty, chastity and obedience, working "in the world" while carrying out the apostolate. The unity with the Church was guaranteed by Bishop Korec: "Initially it was to be a community of laypeople, but then he realized it would be good to also have priests." There was already one: Vlado, consecrated in secret by the same Korec.

The nascent Fatima Community intended to help the presence of the Church in a similar way to religious oblates, without forgetting the original missionary intention toward Russia. Taking even greater risks, Slovaks could travel to the USSR as tourists and bring in religious literature with fewer complications than for Western Christians; they were able to establish personal contacts and even to hold retreats in secret.

[NEXT PAGE - CLICK BELOW >>](#)

In the eighties, the Fatima Community published several samizdat magazines, organized petitions for religious freedom, and helped organize pilgrimages. It kept constant attention on young people: to multiply small groups of university students (who met in what they covertly called "festivals"), coordinated by Vlado who would be replaced by Peter Murdza.

Peter, a graduate in electronics, entered the Fatima Community in '76, and immediately made his own home available to store the first cache of illegal texts, adding a mini-printing press so ingeniously hidden in the basement that the police never managed to find it. Ordained a priest in '87, he continued working as a technician in telecommunications: "Our community was always intended to help Christians in Russia ... We divided up a huge territory: each one was responsible for an area. Today all this makes us smile Like a sort of religious Risk game with him touching Soviet Central Asia. He chose the code name "Vendelin," in honor of the first rector of Russicum, Fr. Vendelin Javorsky, a great missionary.

Other clandestine priests were added: the aforementioned Fiby, mathematician and cyberneticist, was consecrated a priest in February '78 in Krakow, who noted, among others, "encounters with people from Communion and Liberation: our community and this movement had a similar outlook on religious and public issues". Josef Guncaga, a doctor, in Fatima from '77, was consecrated in '82 and is currently a missionary in Russia. Then there was also Ladislav Stromcek, the youngest of the six friends, a graduate in electronics, in the community since '83 and a priest since '88, who passed information about the Slovak religious situation on to Western radios. Finally, Frantisek Novajovsky, who could not be registered with the faculty of theology because he refused to be an informant for the police, was illegally consecrated in '86 and is now rector of

the Slovak Pontifical College in Rome.

Since '89, other initiatives have been started by Fatima inspired by the social doctrine, and from Slovakia, the community has spread to other countries, including Russia, the old dream of Kolakovic.