



# EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

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## Quo Vadis? Seeking Young Catholics in Slovakia

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*“P*remohli ste strach.” Making his first papal visit to then-Czechoslovakia in April 1990, John Paul II’s words to the people were, “You have overcome fear.” Just months earlier, the peaceful mass protests of the Velvet Revolution had delivered the country from four grim decades of Communist rule. Those grueling years had left their mark, the Pope acknowledged to the faithful of Bratislava, where a multitude filled an airfield to hear Mass on the second day of his visit. But he also drew attention to feats of heroic perseverance, especially by the young, “whom they tried to mislead, but who have not lost their thirst for truth, justice, and love, and who have become, in the light of these values, the protagonists of the recent changes.”<sup>1</sup>

*“Nebojte sa!”* More than a quarter century later, the choice of a Pope John Paul II quotation for a Catholic window display in downtown Bratislava recalls a very different message: “Do not be afraid!” These biblical words of encouragement were famously repeated by Karol Wojtyła on his ascendancy to the papacy in October 1978, a time when prospects for the Catholic Church in his native Poland as well as Czechoslovakia still looked bleak.<sup>2</sup>

### Spiritual paralysis?

Forty years have passed since that inaugural papal homily. Does its sentiment resonate in today’s independent Slovakia due to a lingering sense of spiritual paralysis? Or has the Catholic Church succeeded in harnessing the youthful

commitment to righteousness noted by John Paul II during his 1990 visit? While in the Slovak capital Bratislava in late 2017, the *East-West Church Report* asked young Catholic adults how their lives and faith have been shaped by the Church’s trajectory in the wake of the Velvet Revolution.

Zuzana Babicová has chaired the European branch of the World Student Christian Fellowship and is now Slovakia’s representative to this ecumenical youth movement. She was raised by practicing Catholic parents in Zvolen, a town in central Slovakia. The freedoms of the 1990s meant that, unlike them, she was able to attend Catholic elementary

and secondary schools run by the local diocese. Yet Babicová sees a personal sense of faith, rather than the influence of her family or the Church institution, as key to her continued practice of Catholicism. “Everyone has their own reason, even if they are not conscious of it. I went through periods of having questions and doubts,” she acknowledges, “but it was just believing that this is what I want to follow.”

### Dominican input

Looking back, Babicová recognizes the support of the Dominicans, a Catholic order devoted to preaching and education. Priests at the Dominican priory near her childhood home were not afraid to tackle difficult subjects, she recalls, and as an older high school student she benefitted from the events they hosted for college students. When she

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St. John of Matha Church during evening Mass (G. FAGAN)

## Young Catholics in Slovakia *(continued from page 1)*

herself moved to Bratislava to study, Babicová also found Dominican priests serving with the university chaplaincy. “They were really positive role models. The Dominicans are intellectually grounded, so they ask questions and bring doubts into certain subjects. They study a lot themselves; it’s part of their spirituality.”

Babicová also praised her experience of the International Dominican Youth Movement in Slovakia [Slovak: *Medzinárodné hnutie dominikánskej mládeže na Slovensku*], which organizes quarterly retreats for the under-35s at its Pustý Dvor study center near Ábelová in the country’s rural heartland. Their aim is

to reach out to young people who want to deepen their faith or discover it still; who have unresolved questions of faith, or whose own faith has become a huge question; (...) We want to accompany seekers or walk with them as co-seekers.

Here, the Movement is inspired by Czech Catholic theologian Tomáš Halík’s belief that

tomorrow’s Christianity will be neither an “ideology” nor a religion in the sense of a “system of beliefs and rituals” (...) but it must and can be a school of faith, hope and love; a school according to the ideal of medieval universities, of that community of life, prayer, and study in which the truth was sought in free discussion, and what had been meditated upon was given to others (according to the principle of *contemplata aliis tradere*).<sup>3</sup>

The Latin phrase *contemplata aliis tradere* [to hand down to others the fruits of contemplation] derives from 13th-century Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas. It forms part of his argument that an active life delivering to others the fruits of contemplation by means of preaching and teaching is better than a solely contemplative life, “because such a life presupposes an abundance of contemplation. Thus Christ chose such a life.”<sup>4</sup> Aquinas was a Dominican, and the phrase is a motto of the order.



Theology library at Dom Quo Vadis (G. FAGAN)

The Communist regime prevented the Dominicans and other Catholic orders from functioning in then-Czechoslovakia. Their activities were therefore unfamiliar to Babicová’s parents, whose only permitted church involvement was Mass attendance. “What is now available to young people is incomparable to what my parents could receive as spiritual guidance or support from the Church when they were young in the 70s and 80s,” Babicová noted to the *East-West Church Report*. Her mother has since taken advantage of the newer possibilities for theological study and become a lay Dominican.



Wall art at Dom Quo Vadis (G. FAGAN)

Michal Brnický, an accounting analyst with a multinational IT company, was also raised Catholic by believing parents. Unlike Babicová, he is just old enough to remember the tail end of the Communist era, and the tension between his family’s faith and the political system. When Brnický started first grade in September 1989, his father clashed with the school because he insisted his son address teachers as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” rather than “Comrade.” But matters did not come to a head, as the regime collapsed with the Velvet Revolution that same November. In kindergarten, Brnický had joined the Little Sparks [Slovak: *Jiskřičky*]—a Czechoslovakian Communist organization for young children—because his mother did not want him to feel left out. But he was not taken in by making paper doves to wave at the annual May 1st parade of factory workers. “Absurd! It was about peace, but the whole regime was militaristic.”

### Inner sense of faith

When a Christian school opened following the Communist collapse, Brnický was quickly transferred to its first class of Catholic and Lutheran pupils, his city of Liptovský Mikuláš in northern Slovakia being home to a sizeable Lutheran population. Like Babicová, Brnický recalls being attracted to the Catholic Church due to an inner sense of faith. He enjoyed serving as an altar boy and learned to pray the rosary at an early age. “I went to the living room to pray when no one was there because there was a cross there,” he recalls. “So there was some inclination since childhood. Then it just grew.”

Brnický also has close knowledge of the Dominicans, having spent four years as a member of the order. He did not remain, however, and cites the formidable challenges of re-establishing monastic life in post-Communist Slovakia. The key problem, he told the *East-West Church Report*, was the lack of a middle-aged generation as a consequence of the Communist restrictions. Some older members of the order had lived in a monastery during World War II, Brnický recalled, including one over a hundred years old. But others had been in prison, in an ordinary parish setting, or in a few cases kept their status secret, including one whose own mother had not known he was a priest. As a result, “they didn’t have the experience of living in a monastery, or a true sense of being a Dominican,” Brnický rued.

While enthusiastic, the newer brothers were naturally inexperienced, “so this wisdom, this paternal element, was lacking.” Yet Brnický also reports receiving strong personal encouragement from clerics such as Bishop Rudolf Baláž of Banská Bystrica (d. 2011), who was barred from further theological study in the 1960s and banned from serving as a priest in the 1970s. Bishop Rudolf insisted on a strong and independent role for the Church as chair of the Slovak Catholic Bishops’ Conference from 1994 to 2000.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting upon the Church’s current role in Slovak society, Babicová noted that churches are quite full, even though attendance is said to have fallen. Yet she wondered how many people go to Mass due to “peer or family pressure, or just because it’s tradition to go to church on Sunday.” Here, she contrasted her experience as a student in Aberdeen, Scotland, where churches were empty, but she found people to be “more truthful, and in a way more faithful.” Babicová also considers the Catholic Church in Slovakia to be “quite passive” as an institution, especially on issues such as government corruption. Albeit intrigued by the question, she was unsure whether this was a legacy of Communism, however, as she had “always seen the Catholic Church like this.”

### Communist mindset

More familiar with the issue, Brnický maintained that both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have still to overcome their Communist past. Here, he cited the advancement of Bratislava-born Andrej Babiš to the post of Czech Prime Minister in late 2017, even though archival records indicate that he was an agent of the Communist secret police during the early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> When Communism fell, “we were happy to have a revolution without blood,” Brnický noted, “but the problem was that the new politicians came to an agreement with the old ones, and we were unable to replace all the people in government who were ideologically Communist. So many of them remained, and the mindset as well.”

Brnický sees Communist-era thinking further preserved in what he considers the Slovak Catholic Church’s “very defensive approach to the outside world.” This stance is understandable for several reasons, he suggests. During the Communist era, people were pressured to keep their faith

private, leading usually active parishioners such as teachers and doctors to attend Mass in churches where they were not known, as there were “spies in churches looking for people who should be ideologically ‘free from the burden of religion’ from the Communists’ point of view.” The Church was also restricted in its ability to select bishops, Brnický added, with some dioceses long vacant and some clerics collaborating with their oppressors, such as through the pro-regime Pacem in Terris Association of Catholic Clergy [Slovak: *Združenie katolíckych duchovných Pacem in terris*.]<sup>7</sup>

### Message of mercy

Now that the Communist restrictions are no more, the Church has transferred its hostile stance to homosexuality and other gender issues, Brnický observes. “Here in Slovakia to be Catholic is very connected to these topics.” (The *East-West Church Report* noted that one of the few flyers in Bratislava’s St. Martin’s Cathedral was for a free lecture entitled “Gender: Instrument of Neo-Leftist Revolution.”) This emphasis is unhelpful to most Catholics, for whom the subject is peripheral, Brnický argues. He contrasted it with Pope Francis’ wish to convey “the message of *miser cordia*, mercy,” and the more positive approach of clerics such as Archbishop Stanislav Zvolenský of Bratislava. They see their first priority in more positive terms—as support for the family—said Brnický. Given the pervasiveness of problems such as divorce and abortion, he noted, “It’s true that families are not in a very good situation.”



Volunteers and youth at Mamateyka (G. FAGAN)

Following Sunday Mass at the angular modern church run by the Salesians of Don Bosco on Miletičova Street, most of the parishioners streaming out of the doors were young families. Quizzed by the *East-West Church Report* on the challenges of engaging young Slovaks and the relevance of the Communist era, the parish’s Fr. Andrej Kňaze maintained that democracy is still fragile in the country, as

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## Young Catholics in Slovakia (continued from page 3)

“critical thinking is not so developed” in Slovak society due to a lack of democratic tradition. At the same time, he pointed to the dangers of Western materialism: “Society is forgetting that life is not only the 70, 80 years we are here. We are losing the perception of eternity, and we are lacking the movements, structures, and testimonies that will help young people not to forget that there is a God, eternal life. And so they are lacking in hope.”

### Beacons of hope

Yet this is not to say that the situation is hopeless. Fr. Andrej directed the *East-West Church Report* to Mamateyka, an expansive Salesian youth center and chapel founded in 1996 in the working-class Bratislava suburb of Petržalka. The focus of the Salesian order is assistance to poor children, and the center provides sports, music, and other social activities to several hundred young people in the neighborhood, mostly from nominally Catholic families. On the *East-West Church Report's* visit, some of the approximately 100 lay volunteers were preparing the café area for a free concert by *May Be Siblings*. This Bratislava band held their audience in rapt attention with lilting instrumentals on violin and electric piano, against the visual backdrop of aerial footage filmed at locations including Rome and Mont Saint-Michel in Brittany.

Mamateyka holds weekly discussion groups for the children on God, the family, and relationships in addition to such events, young volunteer Maria Šimkovičová told the *East-West Church Report*. Given the prevalence of smartphones, the center's main challenge is to have the children co-operate with one another and be still, however: “To be quiet, listen, and apply some principles to their lives is the most important thing for them right now.” Šimkovičová, her husband, and fellow Mamateyka volunteers also have their own discussion groups, “as young adults trying to know God better.”

Across from Michael's Gate, a medieval entrance tower to Bratislava's old town, is another Catholic outreach center alongside the baroque St. John of Matha Church: Dom Quo Vadis [Latin: Where are you going?]. Formerly a *Soviet Book* store, the building houses a café, theology library, exhibition and event space, as well as rooms for counselling and Bible study. Passersby might assume it to be like any other bohemian café in Bratislava, with its brightly painted bookshelves and mid-century modern furniture. But menu entries are accompanied by suggestions for spiritual reading, and after placing a donation into a jar in return for whatever menu items they have chosen, visitors are invited to select a piece of paper with a biblical verse.

Speaker events at Dom Quo Vadis are on themes such as prayer, pilgrimage, and forging parish community, as well as more challenging issues such as alcoholism and anger management. In this way, the center deals not only with abstract spirituality but “really tries to adjust to ordinary people's lives and what they're dealing with,” says Babicová. It is to such people that the “Do not be afraid!” papal quotation in the window is addressed. Brnický and his wife are among the volunteer team who keep Dom Quo Vadis going. Despite all the challenges facing the Catholic Church in Slovakia, he concludes, “It's alive, I would say.” ♦



Noticeboard at Dom Quo Vadis (G. FAGAN)

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> SK-Slovakia 1990, *You Tube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLgYoxu3uEs>; [Italian] John Paul II, “To the Faithful of Bratislava,” 22 April 1990, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1990/april/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19900422\\_fedeli-bratislava.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1990/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19900422_fedeli-bratislava.html).
- <sup>2</sup> “Homily of His Holiness John Paul II for the Inauguration of His Pontificate,” 22 October 1978, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1978/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19781022\\_inizio-pontificato.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19781022_inizio-pontificato.html).
- <sup>3</sup> [Slovak] <http://dominikani.sk/diela/medzinarodne-hnutie-dominikanskej-mladeze-slovensku-adom/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, Q. 40, Art. 1, ad. 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Ivan Remiaš, “Rudolf Baláž, Chairman of the Slovak Bishops' Conference,” *The Slovak Spectator*, 1 February 1999, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20012180/rudolf-balaz-chairman-of-the-slovak-bishops-conference.html>.
- <sup>6</sup> “Czech Leader Loses Case on Collaborating with Secret Police,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 February 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-02-13/czech-leader-loses-case-on-collaborating-with-secret-police>.
- <sup>7</sup> George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 168-9.

**Geraldine Fagan** is editor of the *East-West Church Report*.

# Towards “a culturally understandable expression of our faith”: An Interview with Pastor Daniel Pastirčák

“Welcome to the machine!” jokes Pastor Daniel Pastirčák, greeting the East-West Church Report with the Pink Floyd lyric following a service with his *Kaplnka* [Slovak: chapel] congregation in downtown Bratislava. The 150-strong community of mostly young adults meets in the A4 Space, a performance venue for contemporary theater, music, and film.

In keeping with its other purposes, this cavernous black studio is lit during Sunday worship by intense spotlight and white pillar candles. The focal points are also minimal: Pastirčák in a white cassock, an altar table draped in white. Accompanied by piano and cello, the congregation sings devotional refrains whose lyrics are projected onto the entire back wall. They are illustrated by an image of Christ on the cross in the form of an upturned peace symbol.

*Kaplnka* was the church frequented by Juraj Kušnierik, a past contributor to the East-West Church and Ministry Report. A prominent journalist with the Slovak weekly current affairs magazine, *.týždeň*, Juraj died of a heart attack at the age of just 51 in November 2015 while at the Iceland Airwaves music festival in Reykjavik, an event also attended by the editor of the East-West Church Report.

On hearing these connections, Pastor Pastirčák shared his fondness for both Juraj and contemporary Icelandic music. The conversation then turned to his church.

## What is Kaplnka’s background?

Kaplnka belongs to Cirkev Bratská [Slovak: Church of the Brethren], which comes from a few movements or denominations.

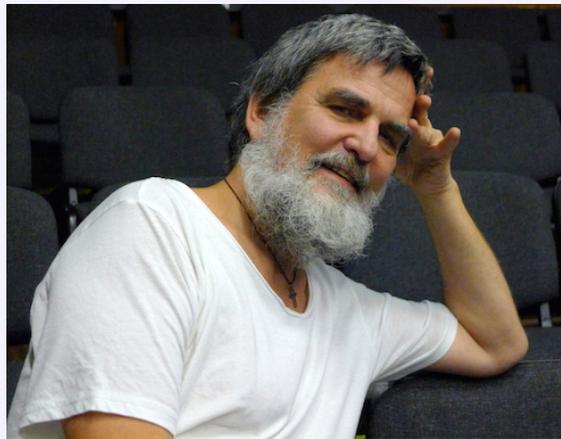
Before World War II there was a Blue Cross movement here in Slovakia in mainline churches like the Reformed Church and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. This was a movement encouraging abstinence from alcohol based upon

born-again, pietistic experiences. When the Communists took over, they forbade religious associations like the Blue Cross, and the leaders of the mainline churches didn’t back it up, so people from that movement shifted to our church or similar churches like the Baptists. So our church is partly from that background.

But the name we have comes from Czech influence, and for me this is an even more important part of our church. It comes from the Unity of the Brethren, which is a much bigger church in the Czech Republic. This is a tradition I like to stress, because John Amos Comenius—its last bishop in the 17th century—was very ecumenical in his thinking, even at a time when there was the clash between Catholicism and Protestantism: those religious wars. When the first Czech Brethren movement came to an end during the Counter-Reformation, Comenius said he did not regret the end of this small Unity of the Brethren, because God wants the great unity of all.

## And what is your own background?

I studied in art school, then practiced the restoration of sculpture, and later studied theology. But I’m mostly a writer. I write fairy tales with mystical, symbolic meaning; poetry; and books of philosophy, theology... it’s difficult to



Pastor Daniel Pastirčák (G. FAGAN)

say what it is! But somewhere there—I like philosophers who were also theologians, like [Thomas] Aquinas.

## What drew you to Christianity in Communist Czechoslovakia?

Under Communism everything was black and white. You were an atheist because Communism claimed to be a scientific theory, and atheism was the scientific theory of the human being. Atheism was institutionalized in that period. If

someone was openly a believer, he was against society, the system. I was sort of a dissident. I was studying in Košice [Slovakia’s second largest city] Art School, where we were kind of hippies—against civilization, but also against Communism. We organized an exhibition of our works, and it was banned. They locked our exhibition because it was critical of the system. After that, they threw me out of art school, because they thought I was the main initiator of the event.

I was a strong atheist at that time. My first contact with the church was as a place of soft dissent, an island of silent resistance. I struggled a little bit, because the attitude of even many active Christians was that we should not be dissident, because our task is not politics. You know the verses about obeying rulers [Romans 13]. Those were misused, and I came into conflict about that even with my friends a few times. That was the difficult part for me, because I had this dissident-minded history.

But resistance to the system was also good for Christians in this period. If you wanted to be actively or openly Christian back then, they would just press you into resistance to the system. It wasn’t that Christians wanted to be dissident—they didn’t. And real ecumenism developed in

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that situation. Those small, sometimes artificial theological issues we have against each other became just funny and unimportant, while the deep-rooted faith we find in each other formed brotherhood. During that time my relationships developed with my pastor on Cukrová [street in Bratislava where the main Cirkev Bratská church is located] as well as with a great man, Anton Srholec, a Catholic priest who was in prison under the Communist regime. He was very free-minded; after the [1989 Velvet] Revolution, even his own church sidelined him. He became my closest friend.

Under Communism in the 1970s, Christians in Bratislava were afraid to express themselves, so they lived more bound in their communities. But on Cukrová, Milan Cícel [a prominent member of Cirkev Bratská] was in touch with The Navigators movement, so some Americans were coming here and encouraging much more of a missionary spirit. People started to share their faith with people outside of the church, and it was in that period that I also came to Bratislava and to this church. I became a Christian in 1979. Through the influence of this missionary-minded group, Cukrová developed quite differently from other churches. Many people came who were involved in culture—artists and different kinds of people involved in the public cultural scene, such as Juraj [Kušnierik] in journalism. We were looking for a culturally understandable expression of our faith. And so we slowly started to lose this narrowly Evangelical, almost fundamentalist mindset.

**How did this develop into your current ministry at Kaplnka?**

Around seven years ago, when I was a pastor on Cukrová, the church there was becoming too crowded. The church leadership team asked me if I would try to start a new church community. This started with an idea. While we were still on Cukrová, we had one worship service in the morning and another in the evening. The sermon was the same, but they said that the form of the evening worship service should be different. This gave us a place for creativity. There were plenty of visual artists and musicians; people who feel that—and this is one of the burdens of that community—somewhere in the past something wrong happened in relation between art and spirituality, between art and religiosity; some kind of negative separation. For example, on one side philosophy, on the other theology. Or artistic sensitivity on one side, spiritual sensitivity on the other. For a long time we had been dreaming

of creating a space where this would be unified somehow, that art would be involved. And we said we wanted to create a place of worship where it would be possible for non-religious people to meet God.

**What elements are different from a conventional church?**

We often have art involved in meditation; for example, a video or installation, or some happening. We had a series of sermons and worship on the *The Decalogue*\* by the great Polish film director, Krzysztof Kieślowski. *The Decalogue* is the Ten Commandments through Kieślowski's eyes. We started our worship with a five-minute presentation from one part of the film. Then I incorporated the story of the film into my sermon, and interpreted that particular commandment.

**Even though there are these modern elements, it's not like some contemporary Western forms of Christian worship. It has a contemplative atmosphere.**

Yes, “contemplative” is right. Another special thing we do is to have seven or 10 minutes after the sermon for meditation, with improvised music. What is also not typical for a church is that we play new music by contemporary composers, like Philip Glass, Steve Reich, or Arvo Pärt. That's part of the liturgy.

**Given your experience of being an atheist finding Christian faith during the**

**Communist period, what similarities or differences do you see now for people outside the church? What are the challenges of presenting Christianity to them?**

The challenge of presenting Christianity today is that sometimes you feel ashamed to call yourself Christian. We are living in a situation where almost 70-80 per cent of the [Slovak] population would say they are Christian, most of them Catholics, but the leadership of the Catholic Church behaves very defensively. They don't like Pope Francis, for example. I find that strange, because I love Pope Francis; for me he's one of the greatest Christians of today. For many, Putin is regarded as the man who will save Christianity from the decadent West. And together with this come political parties that are openly fascist. [During World War II] we had



Sunday worship at Kaplnka Church (G. FAGAN)

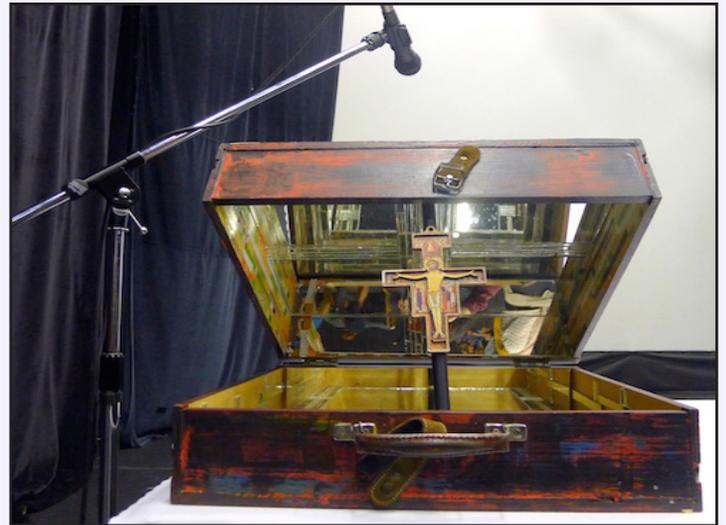
\* For a short review of this work, see Rodney Clapp, “Signs and Wonderings: of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Decalogue,” East-West Church and Ministry Report, 9 (Spring 2001), 12-13; <http://www.eastwestreport.org/articles/ew09109.htm>.

a government in Slovakia where the president, a Catholic priest [Jozef Tiso], was co-operating with Hitler; we were sending Jews to the concentration camps. And some people are saying we should go back to this Slovak state; they are even in parliament now. The Church is not vocal enough about saying this is not Christian. They say it, but very quietly, because they are afraid that they will lose plenty of people who follow them. This is not only in Slovak Catholicism, but also the Lutheran Church, and even our Evangelical Church.

We have friends and people to whom we want to communicate who are more secular people, and these mainline churches do everything to make it more and more difficult to communicate the Gospel to them. I understand why they hate church and how it is used by the radical right in a political battle to say that we are Christian and so we don't want Islam or refugees. Another of the main themes of Christianity in Slovakia now is to fight homosexuals and their issues. This is how the church presents itself, while people have their existential questions and needs. It's so sad, because we have a great opportunity.

**One major secular event you are involved in is the Pohoda Festival. Could you say a little about what that is and what you do there?**

Pohoda is the largest music festival in Slovakia; around 30,000 people attend. For seven years now it ends with a worship service. We have been doing that together



Lectern at Kaplnka Church (G. FAGAN)

with this Fr. Anton Srholec [prior to his death in 2016] and Anna Polcková, a Lutheran pastor. We always have a kind of drama, with professional, well-known actors. We choose a theme—a biblical text—and I write a small script that interprets the theme; for example, God playing chess with the Devil over Job. Then we have music, short speeches. And we always have some ritual involving the people there: an anointing; everyone opening their eyes; sharing bread. So that is what we do for these secular young people. Maybe many of them never attended church. ♦

## Resisting “the Grip of the Open Palm”: Slovakia’s C.S. Lewis School

GERALDINE FAGAN



C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School (G. FAGAN)

Though hugged by the scenic River Danube and the now-invisible border with prosperous Austria, Petržalka retains an air of Iron Curtain suburbia. As if built to illustrate linear perspective, rows of thirteen-story brutalist apartment blocks vanish toward a gray horizon. Tourists head for the baroque churches and cobbled alleys of central Bratislava just three miles away, not here.

Slovakia’s most densely populated neighborhood, Petržalka has many schools, similarly oblong and concrete. But one, almost camouflaged by a wall-sized Communist mosaic celebrating sun, flowers, and studious children, invites its pupils “to explore Christianity in an environment of free inquiry.” Those fooled by the mosaic might be struck by the sign above the main entrance: The C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School [Slovak: *Bilingválne Gymnázium C.S. Lewisa*].

Slovakia is facing a rising tide of secularism. Between 2001 and 2011, national censuses showed a 10.6 percent rise in those declaring no religious affiliation.<sup>1</sup> In a separate 2011

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## Slovakia's C.S. Lewis School *(continued from page 7)*

survey conducted in secondary schools in ten Slovak cities, only 15 percent of teenagers said they trusted the Church.<sup>2</sup>

This is a far cry from Christian expectations when the Velvet Revolution of 1989 ushered a peaceful end to Communist rule in then-Czechoslovakia. Head teacher of the C.S. Lewis School, Dušan Jaura, well remembers those days. “Everybody was happy that now there will be freedom, and there will be more and more people in the churches,” he recalled to the *East-West Church Report* in his office. And yet, “exactly the opposite happened.” Particularly in the larger cities, a once substantial core of committed believers is shrinking, he notes. “This zeitgeist is present everywhere.”

Still, the Slovak picture is not simply one of indifference to Christianity. In the more recent census, 76 percent of respondents identified with a particular church or denomination (largely Roman or Eastern Rite Catholic, with approximately nine percent Protestant and one percent Orthodox.) In the 2011 school survey, 54 per cent acknowledged Jesus to be the Son of God. Only six percent said they never thought about and were not interested in God.<sup>3</sup>

### The “gray zone”

Back in Communist Czechoslovakia, explains Jaura, the committed core of Christians was surrounded by a tiny “gray zone” of people barely in touch with the life of the Church, but attracted to its values. With the fall of Communism, that “gray zone” has grown very much larger. Here, Jaura points to Tomáš Halík, a prominent Czech Catholic priest-theologian and former advisor to Václav Havel, the leading Velvet Revolutionary and late Czech president. Finding religiosity “at the periphery of the ecclesial religion and beyond its visible borders,” Halík has argued that enthusiasm for Christian values is not absent from famously secular Czech society, but “has just lost its traditional shape.”<sup>4</sup> In neighboring Slovakia—an independent nation since 1993 but still in step with many Czech social trends—the C.S. Lewis School, says Jaura, “is very much operating in this area of the ‘gray zone.’” In keeping with what Halík identifies as the “shy religiosity” of society, he adds, “We are ‘shy’ in our approach.”<sup>5</sup>

Dušan Jaura started life far from even the “gray zone.” Raised in a Communist family whose beliefs he did not question, he became a Christian while fulfilling his military service during 1985-87. At that time, Jaura saw Christianity as “a religion of old ladies who are afraid to die,” but then befriended a fellow conscript who revealed after some time that he was a Christian. This was a shock: his friend was not

only not an old lady, but also highly intelligent. Still convinced he could change the world for the better through Communism, Jaura tried for many months to persuade his friend to join the Party, he told the *East-West Church Report*. “I was not able to persuade him, and after a while I did a life experiment.”

Postulating the existence of God, Jaura listed everything he had against Him. Then one night, with his list and a candle, he leaped over the barrack wall and went to a nearby cross on a hill. Jaura had imagined himself reading his list of objections by candlelight and entering into a dialogue; “maybe it was a little bit romantic.” But strong winds meant he was unable to light the candle, “so I had to recite into the darkness from memory. And I was quite shocked, because there was some kind of special experience. I realized there was something that actually understood me, that I’m somehow known by somebody.” At dawn, Jaura returned from the hill

and woke his conscript friend. “I don’t know what happened, but probably I became a Christian,” he told him, and began reading the Bible.

Soon there were problems with the Communist secret police. Jaura’s own father was also “very afraid of what happened” and grew angry when his son decided to study theology in 1988. But in little more than a year Communist Czechoslovakia was no more, and by the time Jaura graduated in newly independent Slovakia in 1993, “the whole world had

changed.” Yet the churches had not. Following the Velvet Revolution, he recalls, “They didn’t know how to communicate with society, because they had been oppressed. They operated only in the private realm.” While wanting to be open in the new conditions, they did not know how, and so behaved as if they were still under restrictions. “We call it, ‘the grip of the open palm.’”

### People of good quality

Yet Jaura had encountered a quite different attitude from his spiritual advisor Milan Jurčo, who was a pastor with the Evangelical Church of the Brethren [Slovak: *Cirkev bratská*] until his death in 1989. Jurčo’s granddaughter Mária Kulisková—now a teacher of religion and ethics at the C.S. Lewis School—points to her grandfather’s steadfastness despite repeated secret police interrogations and several years’ forced labor in Bulgaria. “Even under socialism, he said that we are not second-class citizens,” recalls Jaura, “that we have to be active, and society has to recognize us as people of good quality who can contribute.”

By the early 1990s the Church of the Brethren was seeking to put these words into practice by developing what



(Left to right) Ján Ban, Dušan Jaura, and Mária Kulisková (G. FAGAN)

Jaura describes as “platforms” in secular Bratislava society. One long-standing member of the church, Milan Cícel, played a crucial role. During the Communist years he had liaised secretly with the international Christian mission organization The Navigators. Once the Velvet Revolution broke out, Cícel told *East-West Church Report*, he and at least 10 others who were ready to work as full-time missionaries “assumed that right now, when there is freedom, our contacts would intensify, and we will use the freedom somehow.” Instead, he recalls, they were surprised to find no Navigators’ leadership available to give direction to their ministry. It took a few years before they understood the message: “That we are actually on our own; that we have to think how we are going to live right now in freedom.”

### Challenges of freedom

There were two immediate challenges. They could not follow the American model of approaching church members for gift income for one simple reason, said Cícel:

“No one had any money!” Second, “Missionaries do not have a good reputation in this country.” Here, Cícel mimicked an average Slovak’s response: “Being a missionary means you are paid by some kind of foreign agency to twist my mind! We’ve had enough of those; for 40 years the Communists were trying to make us swallow something we don’t like!” This spurred Cícel and his friends into developing a new philosophy: “To set up platforms that would be both a genuine service to the community and incorporate the values we build our lives on. That’s how the C.S. Lewis School started.”

The association with British Christian writer C.S. Lewis was an obvious choice for a Christian venture seeking to engage with wider society. In twentieth-century Christian thought, notes Cícel, Lewis was “the first dialoguing person.” He could “communicate Christianity in the secular world in a special way,” points out Jaura. First, the Church of the Brethren opened Narnia Elementary School—named after Lewis’ renowned series of children’s books—in Bratislava in 1993. Together with a sister school in Pezinok, some 15 miles away, it now has 700 pupils. Founded in 2004, the C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School itself has 400 pupils. While they receive some state funding, these schools are private; at the C.S. Lewis School, annual fees are 2,000 Euros (approximately \$2,300). While this is prohibitive for many, Jaura acknowledges, a 2017 scholarship scheme has begun to admit those with financial difficulties. “We don’t want to live in a sociological bubble.”

The school’s distinctive character is apparent at the front door. Beside a circular welcome desk, a world map pinpoints locations where alumni have studied, including

France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as Boston, Minneapolis, New York, San Diego, and Tampa in the United States. The central foyer beyond is set aside for table tennis. Briefly a teacher in the building when it still housed a Communist-era school, Dušan Jaura recalls prevalent signage reprimanding pupils for loitering in the corridors. Now this is positively encouraged. “The space outside the classrooms is as important to us as what is inside the classrooms,” Jaura explains. The space is punctuated by relaxed sitting areas with clusters of brightly colored chairs and beanbags. It also contains the Eagle and Child Café, named after the Oxford pub where C.S. Lewis socialized with J.R.R. Tolkien and other writer friends. This is run entirely by pupils, who also produce its baked goods.

The usual subjects—science, history, foreign languages, and IT—are taught here. But the school places particular emphasis on character development through mentoring. In the future, explains Jaura, “many things will be replaced by technologies, so you might not need to go to a place just for information. The question then is how schools should operate in order to survive. And it seems to us that what will still be very important for students is to have some kind of guidance.” Ján Ban, a younger member of the Church of the Brethren, is one of the mentors. His counselling takes place in the context of numerous extracurricular activities, such as sports, drama, and movie clubs. The pupils “don’t leave this school after 3 pm,” Ban tells the *East-West Church Report*. “But it’s more the environment than the activities—they feel like this is an environment where they belong.” “They want to live here, some of them!” quips Jaura.



The Eagle and Child Café  
(G. FAGAN)

### Christian component

The school’s Christian component comes as part of a religion and ethics course unique to the school, which each student follows for 90 minutes a week over five years, from ages 14-19. In the first year the goal is simply to make “the classes like a community,” says Ban, where pupils “understand they can talk freely and openly about their personal stuff, and they are not judged by other people. We open big subjects like family, relationships, and the meaning of life.” The second year examines the whole issue of human personality, using material such as Richard Rohr’s *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* to consider positive and negative behavior.<sup>6</sup> The third year examines themes such as happiness and morality, using as a textbook Os Guinness’ *Steering Through the Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion*.<sup>7</sup>

At this juncture, classes begin discussion of the seven deadly sins. “It’s funny,” observes Ban, that—while most

(continued on page 10)

## Slovakia's C.S. Lewis School (continued from page 9)

pupils do not subscribe to objective morality—"they really understand the concept of sin when we present it, and they accept it." He sees the most powerful transformation in this third year. "Maybe because they struggle with life—they are trying to have good relationships with their parents, but they are failing; they want to have a good future, but they are really lost. And suddenly they see this as a kind of answer." Jaura agrees: "They understand it's definitely something connected with their lives because they understand what is bad about being in sin, in the sense that Martin Luther understood it as being *incurvatio in seipsum* [Latin: turned in on oneself]."

The fourth year follows another Os Guinness work as a textbook, *The Journey: Our Quest for Faith and Meaning*.<sup>8</sup> This contains passages considering the meaning of life by historical figures from Plato to Martin Luther King. It is not until the fifth year that pupils focus on Christianity specifically. "We are trying to make the space to talk about Christianity and religion freely and openly," says Ban. "We see Christianity here as an offer, as an opportunity, but we don't push it." The goal is to present Christianity in a language the pupils understand, agrees Jaura, "not as our, but their topics."

### Gauging the impact

What is the impact of this approach? While only a minority of pupils—20-30 percent—are Christian at least by background, Ban believes the course has a great influence on the way they think and live their lives. "But it's really hard to measure it. We don't know how many become Christian."

While the impact is indeed hard to gauge, the *East-West Church Report* gleaned some impressions by briefly interviewing two older pupils outside the school. Clearly benefitting from the school's bilingual status—both spoke nearly fluent English—they were forthcoming in their views of the religion and ethics component. Sporting a biker jacket with Ramones and System of a Down buttons, Dóra, 16, said she did not believe in God. But she appreciated the C.S. Lewis School's approach when contrasted with that of her previous, regular state school. "It was basically blind following, and we had to believe everything they said," she recalled. "That's what I like about this school, that they are not pressuring this, they want you to believe in what you actually believe in."

Tall with a blond ponytail, Samuel, 17, said that he definitely believes in God. "But it's a bit different with the dogma," he continued to the *East-West Church Report*. "I have my values, which are very close to Christian ones, maybe the same ones, but I don't like somehow the blind following of the crowd in the Christian Church." He also praised the C.S. Lewis School's approach. "They want you to think critically about everything, that's the thing. First you are going through the human psychology, and you are talking about yourself and community. Then you jump to the question of justice and morality. And it's very good, because you're not just learning something that you don't even know what it is about." Despite evident excitement at talking to a native speaker of British English, Samuel then apologetically interrupted the conversation to help a person in a wheelchair he had spotted having difficulty ascending the ramp to the school's entrance.

Dóra characterized everything in the school as "real;" both Jaura and Ban similarly stressed to the *East-West Church Report* that pupils should respond to real questions. Education has succeeded, the two teachers believe, if pupils become seekers. "We can't just say that Jesus is the answer," sums up Ban. "What is the question?" ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Dana Hanesová, "Religiosity and Its Current Educational Context in Slovakia and the Czech Republic," *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, vol. 3 (2013), no. 4, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Koči and Pavel Roubík, "Searching the Altar of an Unknown God: Tomáš Halík on Faith in a Secular Age," in Tomáš Halík and Pavel Hošek, eds., *A Czech Perspective on Faith in a Secular Age* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research on Values and Philosophy, 2015), 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Os Guinness, *Steering Through the Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Os Guinness, *The Journey: Our Quest for Faith and Meaning* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001).

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Terry Lingenhoel (left) and a game at Érd's Youth International Baseball Tournament (G. FAGAN)



# Faith, Youth and Baseball in Hungary: An Interview with Terry Lingenhoel

*On an Indian summer afternoon in late 2017 in Érd, a small city just to the southwest of Budapest, the East-West Church Report came across a scene familiar to towns across the United States. Teenagers and children in helmets slightly too large faced off at the plate against pitchers from opposing teams. Family and friends cheered wildly if the crack of ball on bat produced a home run. But hazai (home) and vendég (visitor) signs revealed that these baseball teams—Érd Moose, Debrecen Tigers, Skopje Sluggers and more—were a very long way from Iowa. Instead of hotdogs and Cracker Jack, cauldrons of steaming hot goulash were offered between innings.*

*Terry Lingenhoel, the linchpin of Érd's Youth International Baseball Tournament, is a long-term missionary with the international Evangelical mission organization Operation Mobilization (OM). An American Presbyterian, Terry is now also a Hungarian speaker and elder at a Baptist church in Budapest. As the tournament wound down, he spoke in the dugout to the East-West Church Report about his unusual ministry through baseball.*

## **What brought you to Hungary?**

Our family originally came to Vienna in May 1990; OM didn't place foreign missionaries here until September 1990. But after nine months we realized we wanted to be in a cross-cultural situation. We had visited Hungary, and the OM team needed a family here. So we decided to come in January 1991, and we've been here ever since.

## **How did your baseball ministry come about?**

I was OM director in Hungary for 12 years. We did a lot of evangelism, church planting, and mobilizing Hungarians for missions. But during that time I especially saw that OM is typically a short-term mission with a lot of proclamation evangelization. That wasn't really working in Hungary, because Hungarians need a long-term relationship to understand and respond to the Gospel. When I finished my leadership time, I wanted to find a ministry through which I could develop long-term relationships.

We started here in Érd in 2002, when a group of baseball enthusiasts came out from my home church in Akron, Ohio. We just advertised in the local paper here that we were going to teach baseball, and we had 60 people come out for that weekend to play with us! One of my current helpers responded to that very first announcement, and now his son is playing. We didn't win too often to begin with, but we were able to recruit young people and keep them, thanks to our coaches and training program. Now I continue my recruiting through schools; every year we go into schools and teach the sport in gym classes.

When we started, I didn't know there was already baseball in Hungary. I thought I was the first, but the Hungarian Baseball Federation actually started in 1992. When I started 10 years later, the internet still wasn't very good, and it took me a year to find them! But their baseball was mostly for adults, so I was able to help develop it for the youth. The Federation asked me to coordinate the youth, and I've been doing that for the past eight years.

## **How much of a role does Christianity play?**

Our club is a secular club in the sense that you don't have to be a Christian to join, but our purpose is mission: to share the Gospel and help people understand what it means to follow Jesus. My board members are not believers, but most of my coaches are, although now I don't require them to be. It is enough if they take on our values and purpose, even if they haven't made a personal decision to follow Jesus. For example, the coach of our Under-15 team knows the Gospel and has translated it for us many times, but he hasn't come to faith.

We have over 100 players and around 15 coaches. Most of the coaches are missionaries, but we also have older players

coaching younger ones, and parents who have learned the sport. The children who come are mostly not believers, similar to the general population. We have quite a few Catholic families, but they are not really practicing.

I'll help anyone get a team started, but I especially like to help Christians so they can use it for ministry. I helped a Hungarian Baptist pastor get the team from Hatvan started; Hatvan, meaning 60, is a town 60 kilometers from Budapest. The Hatvan Hunters have only been going two years, so it's really exciting to see them here today at the tournament. It's one of four mission-based clubs I've helped get started.

## **Why baseball?**

I wanted a team sport, because I think team sports are very good for teaching life lessons. I had actually planned to be a professional American football player, so that probably would have been my first choice. But I also wanted something I could do together with my kids, and at the time they were between 10 and 16, and having three girls I decided baseball was probably better than American football. It's a women's sport as much as it's a men's sport. The only problem is that the fields are much different. You can play American football on a soccer field, which you can find everywhere, but you need a special field for baseball.

## **Do any specifics of the sport tie in well with what the Gospel teaches?**

Baseball is actually quite a good sport for teaching life skills, because baseball is a game of failure. You can fail at hitting seven out of ten times and still be a great hitter, so you have to learn how to deal with that failure, and not let it get you down. It's a team sport, but it's also very much an individual sport, because when you're batting, it's only you. When you're pitching, it's pretty much only you. But you also have to have your team behind you. So it has the benefits of teaching individual self-control, responding to failure, but also teaching team dynamics.

We don't do devotions every day at practice. We pray every game, but mostly our spiritual input happens in the time in-between, when we have camps, or at baseball Bible clubs during the winter off-season. But life lessons are very easy day-to-day with this sport. For example, the sacrifice bunt in baseball makes it extremely easy to talk about Jesus's sacrifice for us. You also have to admit your failure and then forget about it. That ties in with us having to admit and confess our sin, but then God cleanses us. We also take Bible principles and apply them to the situation and struggles that players are going through. So there are some good things that tie it together. ♦

# The Brotherhood of the Armenian Apostolic Church: An Oriental Orthodox Renewal Movement

DANUT MANASTIREANU

I first visited Armenia in the summer of 2000, as Director of Faith and Development in the Middle East and Eastern Europe Region for World Vision International.<sup>1</sup> On the last day of my trip, I asked my colleague Karine if she was aware of the existence of a renewal movement within her own denomination, the Armenian Apostolic Church. I was wondering if they had a movement in Armenia similar to the Lord's Army (Romanian: *Oastea Domnului*) in the Orthodox Church of my native Romania.<sup>2</sup> While devoutly Oriental Orthodox,<sup>3</sup> my colleague was not aware of anything of that kind, but she promised to ask her clergy friends.

To my pleasant surprise, that very same day I had the pleasure of meeting Hamlet Zakharian, Elder of the Brotherhood (Armenian: *Yekhpairakts'ut'yun*) of the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Oriental Orthodox renewal movement that predates its Romanian counterpart by half a century. Hamlet, who has since become a dear friend, is a former nuclear scientist and a man with a holistic vision for reaching Armenians with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We have met many times since 2000. Every time I have visited the Armenian capital, Yerevan, he has kindly invited me to teach the Brotherhood leaders in their modest training facility, or to preach during their Sunday afternoon worship at Nairit Cultural Center.

Everything I share with you here I have learned from the many conversations and email exchanges I have had with Hamlet, his dear wife Gemma—a real “mother of the tribe” to the Brotherhood—and their daughter Astghik, as well as my own research.

## The Beginnings

It all started in 1880 in Cilicia, an Armenian-populated region of the Ottoman Empire now in southern Turkey. Elisabeth Labashlyan (1863-1915), a devout young woman with little formal education, received a series of visions in which a divine voice said “You will be my witness; you will be preaching my Word.” In spite of many difficulties, Elisabeth obeyed and started to preach among local Armenians, using both the Armenian and Turkish languages. She was also a gifted poet, and used this talent to compose songs that made the Gospel message memorable: this remains a feature of the Brotherhood to this day. The ministry of *Haji* (Armenian: Sister) Elisabeth—while not formally tonsured, she lived as a nun—sparked a spiritual revival. The many souls touched were encouraged to stay within the Mother Church; the Brotherhood's Covenant still proclaims faithfulness to “the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church, its rule and discipline, its holy traditions.”<sup>4</sup> But they also formed small groups dedicated to prayer, worship, and sharing personal experiences of Christ, known as “unions of love” (Armenian: *Siro Enkherut'yun*).

Two important figures were revived in their faith through Sister Labashlyan's apostolic and prophetic ministry. Archimandrite Grigor Vardapet Voskerchyan (1845-1895) formally organized the “unions of love” and would become the movement's first martyr. Attacked by a Turkish mob, he was slain by a sword when granted his last wish: to kneel and pray. Fr. Ter Ghevond Jenanyan (1850-1909) was a gifted teacher who also died as a martyr at the hands of the Turks. These three are considered the founders of the Brotherhood.

Some connect this revival to Protestant missionary activity in regions of the Ottoman Empire with large concentrations of Armenians, which led to the formation of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1846. But as Alexander Agadjanian explains, “the Brotherhood was *both* an imitation of Protestant forms of piety and mission *and*, at the same time, a protective reaction against Protestants from within the Armenian Apostolic tradition—a pattern of resisting-through-imitation, common in religious history.”<sup>5</sup>

This is how the Brotherhood describes a typical “union of love” meeting:

They used to start [by] standing and praying the Lord's Prayer “Our Father,” at the end of which one of those present pronounced a whole-hearted prayer, which was closed with [liturgical] singing or [hymnody] from the Divine Liturgy. They often sang “Aravot Luso” (“Morning Light”)<sup>6</sup>... Then everybody sat on the floor. At the prayer meeting the shoes had to be off, having in mind God's command to Moses, “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

They sang, then one of them read the Bible and preached, telling about God's great works. Afterwards the prayers were followed by singing “Ter Voghormya” (“Lord have mercy”).<sup>7</sup> Then standing... they [either sang or] pronounced the Lord's Prayer [again] and closed [the meeting]. Those who had questions could talk; the others either listened or left.<sup>8</sup>

Over the following decades, despite an increasingly hostile attitude to various ethnic minorities within the Ottoman Empire, the fire of this revival spread and touched thousands of people wherever Armenians lived. However, there are no credible estimates of the size of the movement by the end of the Ottoman period; a figure of 200,000 mentioned to us at one time seems far-fetched. Nevertheless, the Brotherhood continued to grow until 1915, when many of its members were massacred during the Armenian Genocide. Those who survived were scattered in various places, including Armenia, France, Lebanon, Syria, and the United States. In some small part, what was meted out as curse resulted in blessing, as the revival spread among Armenians living around the world.



(Left to right) Elisabeth Labashlyan, Archimandrite Grigor Vardapet Voskerchyan, and Fr. Ter Ghevond Jenanyan (<http://bclaac.org/en/>)

## The Communist Period

After the Russian Empire fell, most of its Armenian-populated territory was briefly independent (1918-20) before being incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922. In the aftermath of World War II, Stalin's policy of repatriating diaspora Armenians resulted in semi-underground Brotherhood communities forming in Soviet Armenia. To the surprise of these small Brotherhood groups, the Communist authorities did not bother them too much. They were mostly Turkish speaking, and consequently not considered a threat given the hostility of Armenians towards Turks after the genocide. This allowed the movement to settle and grow, slowly but steadily.

After switching completely to the Armenian language, the Brotherhood experienced a new revival in the late 1970s, when some members of the intelligentsia—including Hamlet Zakharian—were converted. Hamlet himself had been an atheist before developing an interest in spirituality, first practicing yoga and later regularly attending traditional liturgies at Etchmiadzin Cathedral, the oldest and most important worship site of the Armenian Apostolic Church. But his faith was really revived when he came into contact with the Brotherhood.<sup>9</sup> Such developments obviously attracted the attention of the secret police, who started monitoring the movement more closely. The Brotherhood's activism also meant that it was not then officially recognized, but rather viewed with suspicion, by the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Yet a new day came under the church leadership of Catholicos Vazgen I. Born in Romania, he was known as a fine scholar and skillful diplomat. One of his senior bishops, Shahe Ajemyan, once described him to me as having “the rare ability to be flexible without giving up on matters of principle.” In October 1981 Vazgen I validated the Brotherhood's charter and officially recognized it as a legitimate part of the Armenian Apostolic Church. In April 1995 his newly elected successor, Garegin I, listed a number of virtues of the Brotherhood before proclaiming:

We pray to gracious God that He will strengthen all the members in Armenia, Karabakh and in Diaspora with His heavenly wisdom and the virtue of spiritual [strength].

Jesus said to His disciples. “Be my witnesses.” The same

words are addressed to you, our dear brothers and sisters, precious children of the Armenian Apostolic Church... we bless you and your Christ-centered work.<sup>10</sup>

## Times of Freedom

With the fall of Communism, Armenia became formally independent, although in reality heavily reliant upon the Russian Federation. This dependence is unlikely to change, although the political upset of April-May 2018—which saw opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan elected Prime Minister after a popular uprising forced the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan—may lead to a more genuinely democratic Armenia.

The new freedom of the 1990s already resulted in major changes for the Brotherhood, allowing it to develop its ministry without any restrictions and so make an impact beyond its confines. As Agadjanian notes, the Brotherhood's dynamism in the 1990s “affected a large number of people who went on to become leaders in either the religious or socio-political realm; many future priests or Protestant pastors, as well as many politicians and other activists passed through the Brotherhood or were close to it.”<sup>11</sup>

Besides Armenia, the movement is today present and active in many places in the world: Australia (Sydney), Lebanon (Beirut), Jordan, Egypt (Cairo, Alexandria), Syria (Aleppo, Damascus), Iran (Tehran), Canada (Montreal), the USA (Los Angeles, New York), France, Argentina (Buenos Aires, Cordoba), Brazil (Sao Paulo), Uruguay (Montevideo). There are no credible estimates for the size of Brotherhood membership in this diaspora. In Armenia itself, it is estimated to have 1,500-1,800 members.

The overall reception of the Brotherhood in the Mother Church is different in different places. Although the last three Catholicos have been positive towards the movement, its leaders believe that about 20 percent of the clergy view them with suspicion, which is somewhat similar to the situation of the Lord's Army in Romania.

General leadership of the movement is provided by a Representative Council (including delegates from different regions: leaders, ministers, Sunday school teachers, and Bible-study group leaders). The Representative Council elects a Spiritual Council and the Elder of the Brotherhood, who at present and for many years now is Hamlet Zakharian.

*(continued on page 14)*

## Armenian Brotherhood *(continued from page 13)*

In keeping with the essential role played by Sister Elisabeth Labashlyan at the foundation of the movement, women can preach, teach, or be elected as leaders. While many religious communities, both Christian and non-Christian, are dominated by (un)holy misogyny, women are viewed as equal to men in the Armenian Brotherhood.

The ministry of the Brotherhood is extremely diverse. It includes Bible-study groups and larger events for young people, couples, and children; small prayer groups with monthly 24-hour prayer on a particular theme; and visiting the sick. There is also a sports ministry, a microcredit project for small businesses, and a house-building project, which funds the purchase of modest houses, builds new houses and repairs existing houses for the poor.

In addition, the movement has a publishing arm whose work includes the production of translations. Currently, there are perhaps too many from an American context, but more and more original books are being written by Brotherhood members. They even kindly published an Armenian version of my little book on a Christian view of Communism and post-Communism.<sup>12</sup> There are also ongoing efforts to compile for publication poems and songs produced by various members of the movement over its long history.

For a number of years Hamlet Zakharian has been writing a complete history of the Brotherhood. The first part focuses on the Diaspora, and is already finished. Its first five chapters have been translated into Russian for Armenians within the former Soviet Union, and will soon be uploaded onto the Brotherhood's website. The second part, which concentrates on the movement's activities in Armenia, is still in progress. An English translation of this work is also planned, should the necessary funding be available. The aim of Hamlet's book is to inform Brotherhood members and the wider public of the early and later phases of the movement's development, as well as its vision and aims. It is also intended to encourage Armenians to remain faithful to their national Church and help her prosper.

### Future Challenges

What does the future hold for this Armenian Apostolic renewal movement?

First and foremost, there will eventually be a change of leadership. The Brotherhood's future health and growth depend largely upon the smoothness of that transition and the quality of the man—or indeed woman—who takes over the position of Elder.

Secondly, much like similar Orthodox renewal movements (including the Lord's Army in Romania),<sup>13</sup> the Brotherhood has not been interested in encouraging theological reflection in its midst, despite the opportunity created by the ecclesiological challenges it presents to the Church establishment. Perhaps the time has come to take things to the next level with mandatory theological development, while

being careful not to alienate the structures of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Thirdly, the leaders of the movement need to be careful of the risk of missionary colonialism posed by overly close relationships with, and large funding from, Western Protestants—especially from the United States—as this may well come with strings attached.

Yet the Brotherhood will certainly overcome these challenges if it continues to be a creative movement of the Spirit dedicated to church unity and renewal, based upon ardent prayer and solid teaching, and expressed through humble service to the poor and marginalized, for the glory of God and his Kingdom. ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> World Vision International is the second largest Christian humanitarian organization in the world after Caritas. It is involved in community development, relief, and microcredit activities in almost 100 countries.

<sup>2</sup> The author is in the early stages of writing a book on the current state of this movement in Romania, including archival research and interviews. See also Danut Manastireanu, "A Comparison of the Georgian Baptist Church and the Lord's Army in Romania," *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, 24 (Summer 2016), 6-8.

<sup>3</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church and other Oriental Orthodox are not in communion with Russian and other Eastern Orthodox due to fifth-century disagreement over the nature of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> Website of the Armenian Brotherhood, <http://bclaac.org/en/>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Agadjanian, "The Religious Modernity of the Brotherhood: A New Face of Armenian Grassroots Christianity" in Alexander Agadjanian, ed., *Armenian Christianity Today: Identity Politics and Popular Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 76.

<sup>6</sup> A 12th-century hymn composed by Catholicos (leader) of the Armenian Apostolic Church Nerses IV and forming part of the Church's traditional morning prayers, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4LMTREG80w>.

<sup>7</sup> A chant used in the Armenian Divine Liturgy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uiwNcmFPY0>.

<sup>8</sup> Website of the Armenian Brotherhood, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> During this period, Hamlet came into close contact with the Russian Orthodox priest Fr. Aleksandr Men', who believed that movements similar to the Brotherhood should exist in each traditional Orthodox community. Fr. Men' often sent his disciples to experience the lively faith of the Armenian Brotherhood.

<sup>10</sup> Website of the Armenian Brotherhood, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Agadjanian, *ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Danut Manastireanu, *Gerutyunits Anapat [From Bondage to the Desert]*, (Yerevan: Gasprint, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> On similar Orthodox movements, see Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and Radmila Radić, eds., *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

**Danut Manastireanu** is an Anglican theologian living in Iasi, Romania, with a keen interest in Evangelical-Orthodox dialogue.

# International Orthodox Christian Charities: An Interview with Executive Director Constantine (Dean) Triantafilou

*Constantine (Dean) Triantafilou has been leading International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) for over two decades. As Executive Director and CEO, he manages all facets of IOCC's relief and development programs, including its international headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, and 10 field offices in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the US. Shortly after graduating in history from Texas A&M University in 1987, Triantafilou began his career in humanitarian assistance in the early 1990s with community-development projects for the Orthodox Church, working in Kenya and Tanzania. In 1993, Dean joined IOCC as Commodities Manager in the former Yugoslavia. He became the organization's Balkans Representative in 1995 and Director of Programs in 1997, before taking the helm in 1998. Under his leadership, IOCC has distributed over \$625 million in emergency assistance and development aid to families and communities in more than 60 countries across four continents.*

*Editor Emeritus of the East-West Church Report, Dr. Mark R. Elliott, spoke to Dean about this wide-ranging experience.*

## **Could you compare the role of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC) and International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)?**

OCMC shares the faith through missions; IOCC, through humanitarian relief and development, demonstrates and lives the faith. I worked for OCMC during 1988-1989, and I've worked for IOCC since 1993.

## **What are your most important Orthodox sister relief NGOs abroad?**

IOCC works with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOC-DICAC); the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (GOPA-DERD); Apostoli, the humanitarian arm of the Church of Greece; Diakonia Agape, the humanitarian arm of the Albanian Orthodox Church; and the Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate. The existing service and ministry structures of Orthodox churches provide a built-in infrastructure for relief work on the ground, which can speed up the delivery of assistance.

## **Have you had collaboration or joint projects with Church World Service, World Relief, World Vision, or Samaritan's Purse?**

I sat on the board of directors of Church World Service (CWS) for 12 years, and IOCC works with them closely. For six years, I also served on the board of Action by Churches Together (ACT Alliance). Before ACT, the World Council of Churches (WCC) coordinated appeals, funding some IOCC relief efforts in Bosnia. In the past, IOCC collaborated with World Vision in Romania, and, in a limited manner, Samaritan's Purse, which supported us with gifts in kind.

## **More recently known for his ministry in Albania, Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) spent 1981-**

## **91 as acting archbishop in East Africa. Can you share about your work there?**

Archbishop Anastasios, always full of life, gave me my start in development, working on construction projects in Kenya. There I also worked with Metropolitan Jonah of Kampala and All Uganda, then Father Jonah Lwanga. In East Africa I saw faith in action.

## **What worked best in assisting war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina? What was the hardest part of your work there?**

What worked best was keeping things simple and my relationship, as IOCC's Country Representative, with the Serbian Orthodox Church. As for the hard parts, there were many: starting from scratch, struggles with bureaucracy, limited technology, international sanctions, and the constant threat of NATO bombings. Plus, at the time, I was young and inexperienced.

## **When did IOCC Russian involvement end? After the initial Russian aid of 1992, what were the ongoing major involvements there?**

IOCC maintains a relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church through the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations. The aid offered in 1992-1997 was primarily food. We helped in the aftermath of the Beslan terrorist attack and assisted with HIV/AIDS response. IOCC also currently works in other former Soviet states, including Georgia, and we've had projects in Armenia and Ukraine.

## **Are there particular biblical passages that undergird your philosophy of charitable work?**

Two come to mind: Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"; and Matthew 25:35-46, where Christ explains that when we give the hungry food and the thirsty water, and when we welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoner, we're actually caring for Christ.

*(continued on page 16)*

## Triantafilou Interview (continued from page 15)

### What are some best practices that you would recommend to all NGOs involved in relief?

Transparency and accountability are key. These are core to IOCC's approach, and any organization should pursue them.

### Could you give examples drawn from your experience in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of lessons learned the hard way?

One serious concern and lesson learned has to be how to protect staff and how to support their families if a crisis occurs. Working four years in Bosnia during the conflict taught me that relief work can be a risky business.

### How do you ensure accountability and monitor projects?

In addition to IOCC's board of directors, we have annual external audits, internal reviews of projects, and staff on the ground abroad, as well as in our Baltimore headquarters. We monitor and review projects continuously.

### What advice can you offer for maintaining good working relationships with government agencies?

Treat everyone the same. Be transparent, open, and honest. Be smart with your ask, and show why your organization is unique.

### Do you have written policies for combatting fraud, bribery, and extortion?

Yes, we do. In addition, IOCC follows the ACT Alliance policies and procedures of nondiscrimination and steers clear of exploitative business practices ([actalliance.org/documents/anti-fraud-and-corruption-policy/](http://actalliance.org/documents/anti-fraud-and-corruption-policy/)).

### Have Ecumenical Patriarchate-Moscow Patriarchate tensions been a challenge in fulfilling any of your projects?

No, they haven't. We're doing humanitarian relief,

making our work for the Church a worthwhile common cause.

### Have you ever held workshops for social ministry departments of overseas Orthodox Church staff on best practices?

In 2004 IOCC helped organize the International Conference on the Social Witness and Service of the Orthodox Churches.

### Are there particular books, such as Robert Lupton's *Toxic Charity* and *Charity Detox*, that you would recommend to readers?

Roland Huntford, *The Last Place on Earth: Scott and Amundsen's Race to the South Pole*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Random House, 1999). Here we see the difference between Amundsen (organized) and Scott (unorganized) and the consequences of disorganization.

Amy Gopp and Brandon Gilvin, eds., *Help and Hope: Disaster Preparedness and Response Tools for Congregations* (New York: Chalice Press, 2014).

Peter M. Danilchick, *Thy Will Be Done: Strategic Leadership, Planning, and Management for Christians* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016).

Mario Morino et al., *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity* (Washington: Venture Philanthropy Partners, 2011).

Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, *The Life of St. Sava* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989).

### What was your most rewarding and successful project?

It's difficult to choose, but one of the most exciting projects was our collaboration with the Serbian Orthodox Church, developing a bakery and winery in Kosovo. Beginning in 2001, this involved helping reestablish a monastery, providing employment for vineyard workers and bread makers, generating income for social ministries, and realizing success in having Serbians and Albanians working together. ♦

The quarterly *East-West Church Report* explores Christian life in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. We focus on:

- church-state, interfaith, and interchurch relations
- emerging threats to religious freedom for all
- innovative Christian charitable projects and mission
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