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Truth is Greater than Power: An Interview with Monsignor Professor Tomáš Halík

The first four decades of Tomáš Halík's life coincided with the duration of Communist Czechoslovakia. As a clandestine Catholic priest active in dissident intellectual as well as Church circles, he witnessed—and helped shape—developments which contributed to the Velvet Revolution, the peaceful wave of protest that brought down the Communist regime in December 1989. He liaised, among others, with the dissident writer Václav Havel—who would become the first president of post-Communist Czechoslovakia—and Pope John Paul II.

Now in his early seventies, Monsignor Professor Halík continues to minister at the baroque Church of St. Salvator [the Holy Savior] in central Prague, which was overflowing with students on the dark November evening when the editor of the East-West Church Report visited. He is well



Fr. Tomáš Halík (G. FAGAN)

*known locally for his accessible writings on theology: Catholics and Protestants in now-independent Slovakia both referenced these when interviewed by the Report's editor in 2017. Some of Monsignor Professor Halík's works have also won international acclaim, particularly *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us*, which has been translated into six languages. Monsignor Professor Halík followed Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama as recipient of the prestigious Templeton Prize in 2014.*

*Monsignor Professor Halík's autobiography in English translation—*From the Underground Church to Freedom*—was published in October 2019. Soon afterwards he met the editor of the East-West Church Report in a Prague café to discuss his singular life experience. The interview took place in English.*

You were born in 1948, just as Czechoslovakia fell under Communist rule. How did you come to be an active Catholic?

I was baptized as a child, but I grew up without any sort of religious education. In practice, I converted in the late 1960s. Around the time of the Prague Spring [January-August 1968] I met several priests who had spent many years in prison. Some of them were leading theologians, like Josef Zvěřina, Oto Mádr, and Antonín Mandl. It was due to their influence that I started to think about becoming a priest.

And you were also able to travel abroad at this time?

Yes. Before the Prague Spring it was very difficult, and afterwards it was quite impossible for anyone who did not have connections with the Communist Party. But there was a short period during the Prague Spring when anyone could travel to the West, and many students made use of this opportunity—especially to go to Britain, because they were interested in learning English. So I spent some time during my holidays on an English course at Bangor University in North Wales. My father had been editor of the works

of the Czech writer Karel Čapek, and Bohuslava Bradbrook, the wife of a Bangor professor, was also a specialist on Čapek. She invited me, but the last day of my holiday—21 August 1968—was the day of the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia. So I was offered the possibility of studying at Bangor, and I stayed on.

During the Prague Spring, Czech Catholic intellectuals suggested that the Church should not remain on the sidelines, as the popular demands for reform concerned the whole of society.

Yes. In 1968 some Catholic intellectuals and priests—many of whom had spent long years in prison—decided to greet the Prague Spring as an opportunity to take part in the new political situation, hoping some sort of liberalization of the Communist regime would follow. We gathered in March 1968, and in May we travelled to Velehrad—a Catholic pilgrimage site in the region of Moravia. There we founded a renewal movement in the spirit of Vatican II. We also planned to establish new Catholic radio programming and publishing activity, but the majority of this

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Halík Interview *(continued from page 1)*

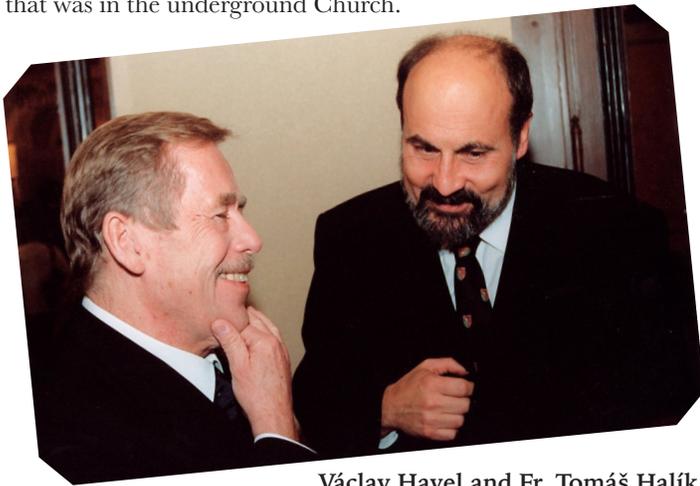
was suppressed after several months, under the Russian military occupation.

For a year or two some possibilities to publish remained. Persecution was not immediate after the occupation; the so-called “normalization” of the regime was introduced step-by-step. This was quite clever, because it meant that we kept hoping: “Okay, the Russian tanks are here, the situation will not be so open as we dreamed, but there will still be some possibilities.” But step-by-step it became worse and worse. While it was not so drastic as in the Stalinist period of the 1950s—there were no executions or 20-year prison terms—it was more sophisticated. Secret police were everywhere, and the psychological pressure people were under destroyed the moral climate in society—perhaps even more than in the 1950s, when everything was black and white.

Was the window of greater freedom afforded by the Prague Spring closed by the time you chose to study to become a priest in the early 1970s?

Formally, there was a seminary for priests, but it was totally controlled by the secret police. Students were not allowed to enter if they already had a university degree. There was no possibility for me to enter because I had already completed my studies in philosophy and sociology at Charles University in Prague. Also, I already had some contacts with dissidents, including Václav Havel.

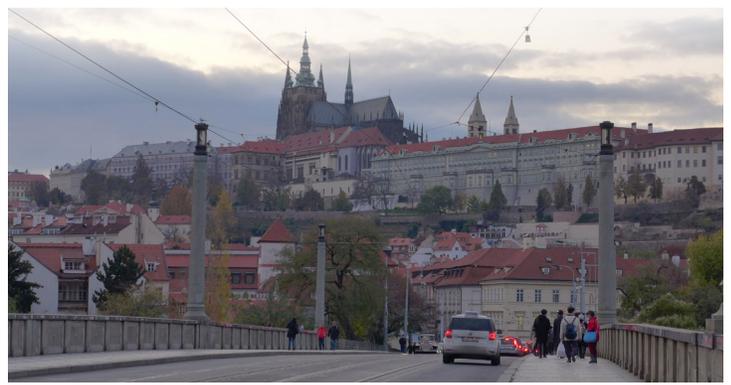
Furthermore, my intention was to work in another way than the priests in the officially recognized parishes. I felt my vocation was to work with students and academics—the intelligentsia—because this was the milieu that I knew very well. The only possibility for that was in the underground Church.



Václav Havel and Fr. Tomáš Halík
(Source: T. HALÍK)

What form did the underground Catholic Church take in Communist Czechoslovakia?

It was not a united organization—there were several groups. One part consisted of priests who had been officially ordained but who had lost their government permission to serve as priests. All these official priests were practically in a schizophrenic situation. They were paid by the state, but if they performed their work well—if they had a full church, or the interest of young people—they were punished. Everywhere there were Communist-appointed secretaries for church affairs who controlled everything, especially the priests, and they had the power to take away their permission without any explanation. If a priest had some kind of activity with young people, he was especially likely to be punished. Some were sent to regions near the border, which was practically a religious desert. Or, their permission was taken away completely,



St. Vitus Cathedral rising above Prague Castle (G. FAGAN)

and they had to work as a window cleaner or janitor. So they worked in such jobs while continuing to perform some priestly activity in private apartments.

Another part of the underground Church were priests who had been secretly ordained by bishops who had themselves been secretly ordained. Even prior to the Communist putsch in 1948, Pope Pius XII expected hard persecution of the Church, so he allowed the secret ordination of bishops for this time of persecution. But practically all of these secretly ordained bishops were discovered and arrested by the Communist secret police. Some of them used the last moment before they were taken into prison to ordain another bishop. However, this was without a decision of the Holy See, so things became complicated from the point of view of canon law.

The third part of the underground Church were priests who were ordained by bishops in other so-called socialist countries, such as Poland and East Germany, to which we were allowed to travel. I was ordained a priest in East Germany in 1978, in the private chapel of the bishop of Erfurt.

And there were very few people who knew you were a priest?

Yes, even my mother was not allowed to know about it. There had been damaging experience of family members telling others, and of that information being passed on.

How did the ordination take place?

In the autumn of 1978 I was awaiting an invitation to go to Erfurt for my priestly ordination. Then Pope John Paul I died suddenly, and we thought that might put a stop to the process. Among the bishops there were different attitudes towards the underground Church—some were more cautious about supporting it. In time the date I should be in Erfurt was clandestinely communicated to me: 20 October. So I went there, received my ordination, and celebrated my first Mass with the then auxiliary bishop of Erfurt, Joachim Meisner, in a monastery chapel.

There were monasteries in East Germany at this time?

Yes, the persecution in East Germany was not so drastic as in our country. The Catholic Church there was in a sort of ghetto—they were isolated from society—but inside this ghetto there were some possibilities which we did not have.

In Czechoslovakia, monastic orders had been shut down by the Communist authorities in 1950, in the Action K Operation.

Yes, there was no real monastic life. There were only several houses where old nuns lived, who were allowed to care for even older nuns or disabled children, for example. There was an attempt during the Prague Spring to revive monastic orders along with other Church institutions, but this was stopped.

You became a priest just as Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope John Paul II. How did you feel when you heard of his election, especially given his similar background as a priest in Communist Poland?

John Paul II had been elected a few days before my ordination, on 16 October. Immediately after my first Mass I went to the bishop's apartment to watch the papal inauguration on Western television, which it was possible to view in that part of East Germany. His famous first sermon—"Do not be afraid!"—was a good motto for my future activity.

Did your status as a clandestine priest allow you to work in an academic milieu?

No, I was not allowed to teach at the university after my first conflict with the Communist regime. At my doctoral award ceremony I did not give the expected speech of thanks to the Communist Party, but instead honored our professors who had been expelled from the university. I ended my speech with a quotation from Karel Čapek: "Truth is greater than power."

So I had a different civil profession. To begin with I worked as a sociologist, but in that role I also experienced some pressure from the secret police. For the last seven years of the Communist regime I worked as a psychotherapist to alcoholics and drug addicts.

How did you pursue your vocation of ministering to the intelligentsia?

Some priests in the underground Church, including myself, were in contact with other groups of dissenters. There was religious dissent—our underground Church; political dissent such as the Charter 77 human-rights initiative; also cultural or intellectual dissent—lectures in private apartments, *samizdat* [Russian: self-published literature], and so on. I built bridges between the religious dissent and this intellectual dissent. Part of the intellectual dissent was Christian, and some of the lectures in private apartments were on theological and philosophical topics. Some theology professors and intellectuals came from the West to lecture to us, including some quite famous names, like Cardinal [Christoph] Schönborn and Cardinal [Walter] Kasper, Hans Küng, and Johann Baptist Metz. There were also some philosophers, like Charles Taylor and Jacques Derrida. They came just for the weekend as private tourists, and we organized the lectures. There was a lot of conspiracy involved!

How risky was your activity?

We had to be careful. I did not tell many of my friends from Charter 77 that I was a priest. Some people there were very close friends of mine, and they knew about my activity, but it was customary practice only to give and receive information that was really necessary. This was because nobody knew what would happen during interrogation by the secret police. There could be some violence—beatings—during interrogation. For example, Václav Malý [now auxiliary bishop of Prague] was a dissident who built bridges between religious dissent and the political dissent of Charter 77. He was beaten by the secret police during interrogation.

Were you ever interrogated or beaten?

I was interrogated by the secret police several times. They

had a suspicion that I had some contact with the underground Church and also with some of the dissidents, but they could not prove it, so I was not arrested. I was never beaten.

Did the underground Church also co-ordinate closely with official Catholic structures in Czechoslovakia?

Yes. Part of the official Church were collaborators and agents of the secret police, but there were also others who were quite honest, so there was not much of a strong division between the official and underground Church.

It must have been challenging for you to liaise with those in the official Church.

The secret police were everywhere, and there was a special law on violating state control of the churches. The typical punishment was two years in prison, but if contact with foreign countries like the Vatican was involved, it could be even worse. We knew there were microphones in many apartments. So we had to be careful and act as in some sort of conspiracy. We had some techniques for

how to avoid secret surveillance. Cardinal Reinhard Marx in Munich once told me that he visited our Archbishop [František] Tomášek in Prague in those days and asked him: "Your Excellency, can we speak openly here?" Tomášek said yes, at the same time vigorously shaking his head to indicate no.

In your autobiography you describe how, when you visited Fr. Oto Mádr, he left a faucet running to obscure the conversation. Instead of a spoken conversation, there were also times when you exchanged written notes and destroyed them as soon as they had been read. How did such a conspiratorial existence affect your relations with the wider Catholic Church?

We were not so isolated from the theological and philosophical thinking in the West—but that was in our relatively small circles. After the fall of Communism, I discovered that persecution had a very destructive effect upon the intellectual level of the Church. Slight persecution is always good for the Church, but under very strong persecution the majority of our priests were isolated from the development of the Church in the West. As a result, there was some culture shock following the fall of Communism. Acceptance of the reforms of Vatican II was too superficial in our country, because our priests had no opportunity to study the authors who created the intellectual background of Vatican II. Without this intellectual background, the reforms were just formal, very superficial. We moved the altar, we switched from Latin to our native language, and so on, but the spirit of Vatican II was not well understood by many priests.

Paradoxically, an exception to this was those priests who had been most isolated—the priests who were in prison, including my mentors, Fathers Zvěřina, Mádr, and Mandl. In prison they experienced practical ecumenism with Protestants and some non-believers, and they discovered that they had much in common. They dreamed about the future Church being a fuller Church—an ecumenical, serving, and open-minded Church. Some of them also understood and accepted these hard years in prison as a sort of pedagogy from God: a form of purification of the Church, or

(continued on page 4)



Pope John Paul II and Fr. Tomáš Halík
(Source: T. HALÍK)

Halík Interview (continued from page 3)

punishment for its clericalism and triumphalism. When they left prison in the late 1960s and received the first information about Vatican II, they said: “Ah yes, this is exactly what we dreamed about in prison.”

How much impact did theological thinking have upon the political dissident movement, especially after Charter 77? Its most prominent symbol, Václav Havel, was not an overtly religious person.

The wider context is this: I think that the Communist regime in Moscow, which controlled all the regimes in the satellite states of the Eastern bloc, decided to choose Czechoslovakia—and especially Bohemia—as a field of experiment for total atheization. We already had some anticlerical tensions during the First Czechoslovak Republic [1918-38], and some tension between national identity and Catholic identity due to the Hussite Wars in the early 1400s and violent re-Catholicization in the 17th century. The situation was quite different in Poland, where the Catholic Church was a pillar of national identity against Orthodox Russia and Protestant Prussia. Czechoslovakia was a relatively secularized country even before the Second World War.

The Communists decided to finish this off by creating an absolutely atheist country. But in Czech national psychology there is always sympathy with the persecuted, so this pressure had the opposite effect. The priests in prison in the 1950s made a great impression upon the other prisoners, for instance. The moral authority of the Catholic Church grew, especially in the big cities, among intellectuals and young people. In the 1970s and 80s, there were many sympathizers and converts.



Cardinal Archbishop František Tomášek and Fr. Tomáš Halík
(Source: T. HALÍK)

There is something peculiar in the Czech national mindset: practically none of the important Czech cultural figures of the 20th century identified fully with the Church—but none were atheists. The most typical trait was a sort of open humanism with some transcendental dimension. Sometimes I call it “something-ism”: “I don’t believe in God, I don’t go to church, but there must be something.” This “something-ism” is the most widespread religion in our country.

The ethical dimension of Christianity in particular was accepted by such humanists, people like Karel Čapek. Václav



Downtown Prague bookstore display marking 30 years since the 1989 Velvet Revolution (G. FAGAN)

Havel, too, was a humanist with a spiritual and very strong ethical dimension. During his time in prison he met Catholics like today’s Archbishop [of Prague, Dominik] Duka, and the dissident and later senator Václav Benda, among others. In the 1970s and 80s Havel and his brother Ivan hosted private house lectures on philosophy. I delivered some, including on the Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel, French personalism, and religious thought. The Catholic philosopher and natural scientist Zdeněk Neubauer—a special man—had a great influence on the thinking of Václav Havel. So Havel had some good friends among the Catholic intellectuals. He was deeply interested in religion—a spiritual man, if not fully identified with the Church. He was greatly interested in interreligious dialogue, Oriental spirituality. But he always said, “I was baptized, I received confirmation, I am Catholic, and I feel like I am on the same ship as the Christians.”

How significant a role do you think the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia played in bringing about the Velvet Revolution of 1989?

Our Cardinal Tomášek was very cautious at first, and this was perhaps the reason why the Communists decided to let him take over in Prague after Cardinal [Josef] Beran was pushed to go into exile in Rome in 1965. They appointed Tomášek as the apostolic administrator—absolutely controlled by the state—and he was very cautious. He followed the policy of the Vatican at that time, which was “small steps,” or not provoking the Communists. But Tomášek was always very peaceable towards Rome and papal authority, so when it became clear in the late 1970s that Pope John Paul II supported a stronger line due to his personal experience of Communist rule, Cardinal Tomášek underwent a great change.

One reason was the election of John Paul II and his influence, but the second was Charter 77. When Charter 77 was published, the regime pushed Tomášek to say something against the Charter and so to distance the Church from it. Tomášek knew that some of the dissidents involved were former Communists, so he was somewhat distrustful anyway. After his statement was published, however, Fr. Josef Zvěřina and the most important theologians from among the dissidents approached him and said: “You cannot be against the people, they are fighting for justice, and we must be on the same side as them.” Cardinal Tomášek then selected three aides from the underground Church: Fr. Zvěřina, Fr. Oto Mádr, and myself. He was already in his eighties in the years leading up to the Velvet Revolution, so he needed some help. We prepared many

documents, including some pastoral letters, but he signed them with his authority.

By the late 1980s Cardinal Tomášek became a symbol of the spiritual struggle against the Communist regime, one of the symbols of dissent. Catholics—and especially those in the underground Church—became an important part of the dissident movement. They were not the only part—not even the most important—but important nevertheless.

During a dramatic situation such as the Velvet Revolution, a spiritual-religious dimension to society always emerges. The people become more sensitive to religious and spiritual values in such a dramatic situation. The demonstrations in November 1989 were on Wenceslas Square, where there is a statue of our national patron saint, St. Wenceslas. Václav Malý was the moderator of these demonstrations. He had been ordained a priest openly, but he lost his permission once he signed Charter 77, and he subsequently worked as a boilerman—quite a common job among dissidents! He had also spent time in prison and was well connected with Václav Havel, who by contrast was already relatively well known through *Radio Free Europe* and *Voice of America*. Many people were listening to Western radio, and this was the only way a lot of people not personally connected with the dissidents could receive information about them. Fr. Malý was not at all known, but he found himself at the nucleus of the Velvet Revolution.

Václav Malý prominently addressed the demonstration attended by three-quarters of a million people in Prague's Letná Park on the last weekend of November 1989.

Václav Malý was a relatively young man then, but he was also a Catholic priest. He initiated something very important during that decisive demonstration in Letná Park. There was a young policeman who came to apologize to the crowd [for a brutal attack by riot police on a peaceful demonstration in central Prague on 17 November 1989]. Václav Malý then asked the people to pray the “Our Father,” with the focus on “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” To many this came as a surprise; you could see how people tried to remember the words of the “Our Father.” But for me it was a very important psychological and spiritual moment. [Footage of this may be seen at “Druhá obří demonstrace na Letné (26.11.1989),” *YouTube*, 22 October 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxmthRAIrGM&t=2045s> from approximately 28.00 to 35.00.]

Prior to that, on 12 November 1989, [13th-century] St. Agnes of Prague was canonized by Pope John Paul II in Rome. This occasioned the first Mass broadcast on public television in Czechoslovakia, and 11,000 pilgrims were permitted to travel from our country to Rome for the canonization ceremony. That was my first possibility to meet John Paul II in person. I believe that event had an important impact upon the psychological climate of Czech society. When the demonstrations and all the dramatic events followed later in November, some began to call it “the Revolution of St. Agnes.” This was the most widespread name before some



Memorial of the student demonstration of 17 November 1989 in downtown Prague (G. FAGAN)

Western journalists named it the Velvet Revolution, by which it was subsequently known. But at the time, people said “the Revolution of St. Agnes” due to an old prophecy, which said that when Agnes would be canonized, there would be better times in our country. I cited this prophecy in a speech at the canonization ceremony in Rome. When I returned to Prague with Cardinal Tomášek, the Italian ambassador greeted us at the airport with, “Your Eminence, there is a revolution!”

How do you feel about the process of lustration [de-Communization, particularly disqualification of Communist officials from public office] since 1989? Has enough been done by the Czech Catholic Church in this sphere?

I was quite happy that the Velvet Revolution was truly “velvet.”

It did not follow a Jacobin path: there was no hunting down of enemies, revenge, or violence. But I am afraid that the process afterwards followed the other extreme—trivialization of guilt. One extreme is witch-hunting and revenge, but the other is just to forget about everything and say: “I was a dissident, you were an informer, and everything is okay.” I am afraid that is what has happened.

Forgiveness and reconciliation form the way between the two extremes, and the Church should be more active in this process of reconciliation and healing. I remember listening to an interview many years ago with [Soviet dissident author Aleksandr] Solzhenitsyn, in which he was asked what would follow the fall of Communism. His reply was: “*Budet dolgaia doroga vyzdorovleniia*”—“There will be a long road of healing.” I think that is true, because after the fall of a dictatorship, society is always sick. There are some people who want revenge, some people who are guilty, and in our case the guilt was very different from criminal guilt—just silence,

(continued on page 6)



Fr. Tomáš Halík addresses the crowd in Letná Park prior to a Pontifical Mass by Pope John Paul II on 21 April 1990. (Source: T. HALÍK)

Halík Interview (continued from page 5)

passivity. Christians should be experts in reconciliation, and reconciliation is a process; it does not mean just saying that everything is okay. It is important to name the situation using the right name, and it is important for the people who are guilty to ask for forgiveness, and for there to be some sort of penance.

In our country, however, I think we moved a little too quickly. The [October 1991] law on lustration was important, but after Communism fell, the last Communists became the first capitalists. Some of them—especially those who had connections with the secret police, which was the cleverest part of the Communist regime—were the only people with financial capital, along with capital of information and capital of connections, and they used all this. They were not permitted to enter the political sphere directly because of the law on lustration, but they entered the business sphere and became a moneyed elite who began to influence the political sphere from behind the scenes. So the results of the Velvet Revolution were very mixed—some dissidents like Václav Havel became prominent figures in politics, but after him came former Communists and Václav Klaus [Havel’s successor as president from 2003-13] with his ideology. They think that the market can solve all problems. It is rather like the economic determinism of Marxism in reverse. Whereas the Communists expected that, with the socialization of industry, a new socialist human being would be created, they expected that, after the privatization of industry, there would be a new capitalist human being with initiative and responsibility. But it



Václav Havel Street in the Czech Republic’s second city, Brno. The graffiti beneath jokes “And who are you?”- Václav Klaus.” Klaus, Havel’s successor as Czech president, was fond of using the phrase to intimidate opponents. (G. FAGAN)

doesn’t work out like that in practice!

When John Paul II was pope you were made a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers. What has been your experience in this sphere in the Czech Republic?

People say that Czech society is the most atheist society in the world. I do not see things in this way. It is true that just a few people here fully identify with the churches, but there are also many sympathizers. In my book *Patience with God*, I liken this situation to the biblical story of Zacchaeus. After a long period, the Church once again has the opportunity to enter the public square, but we pay attention only to people who are applauding us and to some minorities who are against us. We do not mention that the trees along the way are full of Zacchaeuses; people who have some interest but prefer to maintain a certain distance. Jesus came

up to Zacchaeus, called him by his name, and said, “I must be in your home.” I believe that it is most important to be in dialogue with these seekers, and I have found this to be my personal mission. In addition to my books, I founded the academic parish of St. Salvator, which is oriented towards students in Prague, and the Czech Christian Academy, which now has around 2,000 members in more than 60 towns and cities across the country [<http://www.krestanskaakademie.cz/clanek/465/>]. Its volunteers organize public lectures in galleries, museums, and schools, which we find to be better venues than churches and parishes houses. We also invite people from outside the Church, and offer topics that are not just church-oriented, but more open. ♦



Church of St. Salvator [the Holy Savior], opposite Prague’s Charles Bridge, where Fr. Tomáš Halík is chaplain. Services here are packed with students. (G. FAGAN)

BOOK REVIEW

From the Underground Church to Freedom
by Tomáš Halík (translated by Gerald Turner)
Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019
325 pp., \$24.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-268-10677-5

GERALDINE FAGAN

Tomáš Halík has good reason to describe *From the Underground Church to Freedom* as “not just autobiography, but half a century of Czech history.” The first four decades of Halík’s life coincided almost exactly with the duration of Communist rule in his homeland. Particularly as the regime unraveled in the late 1980s, Halík was also a linchpin between leading dissident intellectuals—including the writer Václav Havel, who would go on to lead then-Czechoslovakia as its first post-Communist president—and Catholic leaders, including Pope John Paul II, whose historic 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia Halík was instrumental in arranging. In one choice vignette, Halík is a dinner guest at the Vatican two days before the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, as swelling crowds of demonstrators are broadcast on television. “This is the end of Communism, and not just in East Germany,” he recalls the Polish pope as saying. “Get ready: you too will soon be free!” The regime was gone just three weeks later.

Insider glimpses of how Catholic clergy and largely secular dissident intellectuals joined forces over shared principles in order to resist the Communists in Czechoslovakia are an obvious appeal of this book. But while Halík is not the only individual able to offer such a vantage point, his status as a secretly ordained priest allowed him to oscillate between the two circles to a singular degree. Halík dared not risk telling his own mother that he was a priest, or even Cardinal František Tomášek—then leader of the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia—until as late as 1988, by means of a scribbled and then hastily destroyed note. Thrilleresque episodes such as this are further highlights. A sense of danger is palpable as Halík recalls another exercise in evading secret police surveillance: a three-hour walk through Prague in the early 1970s with Fr. Václav Dvořák, then working at an antiquarian bookstore after years spent in prison. This is when Halík learns for the first time of the existence of a strictly secret underground community of priests in Czechoslovakia, all working in secular occupations.

Today, Halík is best known as the author of accessible theological works stressing the need for Christians to engage with seekers of faith wherever they might be—to build bridges with secular society, and for clergy in particular not to present themselves as having a ready answer to every question. In summary, he writes,

I am convinced that if the Christian church is to stand the test in the current transformation of civilizations and in the transition from the modern to the post-modern epoch, it cannot simply concern itself with the orderly sheep in its fold, or with traditional mission work whose aim is to turn seekers

into dwellers and squeeze them into the existing institutional and mental confines of the churches. It has to step outside its boundaries and seek to “accompany seekers” with mutual respect, without proselytizing intentions, with the rule that not only they, but we too, will be transformed, because we do not possess the whole truth, the truth is our common goal. The truth that is given us in Christ is not a static object and set of formulae but the way and the life, something that is dynamic and constantly calls on us to “put out into deep water.”

It appears a persuasive argument: Halík estimates having baptized or confirmed around 2,000 adults—mostly university students or lecturers—after lengthy preparation.

Detractors, criticizing Halík’s stance as a compromise too far with loose Western secularism, may point to the Catholic Church’s conservative identity as key to its endurance under

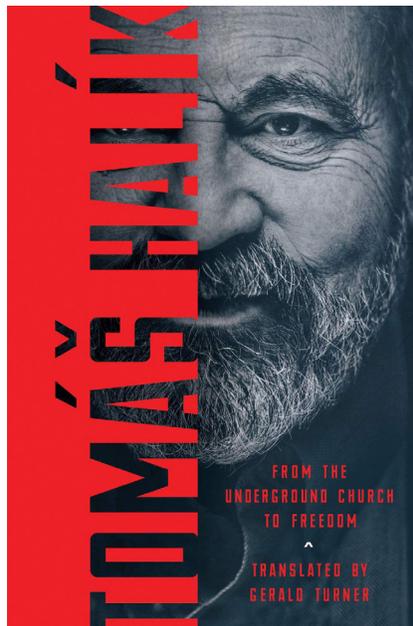
Communism. Intriguingly, however, Halík demonstrates in his autobiography that a radically reformist attitude—including support for the starkly modernizing changes introduced into the Church in the early 1960s by Vatican II—was shared by prominent older clerics who had survived brutal terms of imprisonment in the 1950s. Instead of yearning to return to how things were in the Church prior to 1948, he writes, they treated the totalitarian conditions in Czechoslovakia as an opportunity for priests to acquire new experience through immersion in secular life, believing that this would prove valuable in a future free—but considerably de-Christianized—society.

Halík was raised in the early Communist period, when religious persecution was at its most vicious in Czechoslovakia and such clerics were still in prison. Yet on his path towards faith, we see how he, like them,

is propelled not by the rigidity of tradition—on first examining a Bible, he observes simply that it “neither poses nor answers the question of whether God exists”—but through interaction “with a world of mystery, beauty, and the spirit.” Halík’s teenage realization that he had converted to Christ comes after a lone hike to a ruined and locked rural church, where he spends time in prayer.

Indeed, Halík’s continued spiritual development relies upon remaining “a modern thinking and feeling person” after his conversion, fully engaged with the secular world. He is reassured by the selection of works one of his mentor priests, Fr. Bonaventura Bouše, keeps on his desk: the Bible, a life of St. Francis of Assisi, *Stories of the Desert Fathers*, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Kafka’s novels. It is this sensibility that motivates Halík’s dissident

(continued on page 8)



Halík Review *(continued from page 7)*

activism. For him, the 1968 Prague Spring becomes not just an internal Communist Party struggle over reform but “a spiritual and moral confrontation about the very moral and cultural basis of our nation.” In turn, Halík identifies his act of placing the death mask of Jan Palach—a young man who set himself on fire in 1969 to protest against the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring—into a niche from which students had removed a bust of Lenin, as his first step towards becoming a priest.

A weight of lived experience thus supports Halík’s critique of Czech Christians who came to depend upon Communism as a needed enemy, and who lately have found the “decadent West” (ironically, a term also used by the Communists) to be a convenient replacement for the old atheist regime. It also underpins his plea to

Western Christians not to praise the Catholic Church in the former Czechoslovakia as a Sleeping Beauty who “blissfully slept through the periods of turbulence and Vatican II” during Communism to wake into the “delightful immaculate state of the premodern church.” Those who vaunt the fact that they do not have tooth decay, he warns, should first ask themselves if this is perhaps because they have dentures instead of real teeth.

From the Underground Church to Freedom will naturally be of greatest interest to those interested in how the Catholic Church fared in Communist Czechoslovakia. To a wider audience, however, it also offers deep insights into the mechanisms of how personal spiritual and moral reflection can precipitate historic political change. ♦

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

“You don’t see the big picture— you just do what you are called to do”: An Interview with Petra and Tom Damms

Born in then-Czechoslovakia, Petra Damms was 12 when the Communist regime fell in 1989. After many years abroad, she returned to Prague in 2012 with her British husband, Tom, and subsequently began a Christian ministry providing material and spiritual support to detained refugees, Dignity. The Damms and their two daughters attend an international, nondenominational church, the International Church of Prague, which is led by U.S. Pastor Drew Stephens.

In November 2019 the editor of the East-West Church Report met with Petra and Tom inside Prague’s Laterna Magika [Czech: Magician’s Lantern] Theater—in November 1989 the impromptu headquarters of the peaceful revolutionaries opposing the Communist regime. The conversation took place in English.

Petra, did you have a religious upbringing in Czechoslovakia?

Petra: No, not at all. My grandparents were members of an underground Protestant church in southern Bohemia [now part of the Czech Republic]. They did not even have their own Bible—there were just pages torn out of a Bible circulating from household to household. People added their comments and reflections, and this was passed around the community. However, my parents lived and worked in northern Bohemia and respected the Communist regime—it was everything to us. My mother would identify as a believer, but she did not attend church, and my father was a strong atheist. I thought that if the government put you in prison for something, then it had to be bad. I never wanted to have anything to do with this “God” thing; it was not for me.

Then 1989 came. The Velvet Revolution meant that I was allowed to go to university—previously that would have been impossible, as my parents were not members of the Communist Party. I joined a student exchange program to the United States for one year. But I stayed nine years—I got married and had a daughter. Unfortunately, that relationship became very abusive, and I had to escape—with my daughter—a situation of domestic violence. I left in the summer of 2005—I actually came to Christ on the flight.

There is more to that story—I don’t know if you want to hear it or not.

Go ahead.

Petra: As I was leaving the Czech Republic to go to the U.S. for what I thought was just a year, my grandma came to the airport and gave me her Bible. This was the one with taped pages and different people’s handwriting in it. I took it just as a keepsake—I never read it. When we were at the airport preparing to leave the U.S., one of the items I felt that I needed to take in my carry-on case was this Bible. Then, on the onward flight from Vienna to Prague, as I placed my case in the overhead locker, I felt an order—not “Maybe you should do that,” but “Keep that Bible with you!” It was strange, because I was thinking of coloring books and toys to amuse my child. Why would I need this keepsake? But the sensation froze me—“You do that!”—so I took the Bible.

We were forced to make an emergency landing. About 15 minutes into the flight from Vienna, one of the engines failed, and the aircraft dipped for a second. Everything was at the ceiling, and people were injured and bleeding. Then, a few minutes later, the second engine failed; the pilot came onto speaker phone and told us that we would not make it back to the airport, but would land wherever we could, and that the flight attendants would prepare us for an emergency landing.

But the flight attendants were crying and could not speak. At that moment, I imagine all of us were thinking, “This is it, we are going to die.” That was the moment when I knew I needed to open the Bible. With this fear—with my brain saying, “This is it, we are going to die”—I opened the Bible, and I felt an outpouring of love, forgiveness, and reassurance embrace me. I thought, “If I’m feeling like this—at peace—when I know I’m meeting death, I’m going to follow this God if I walk out of this aircraft. I’m going to follow you and surrender my life to you, God. Whatever you call me to do—my life is yours.” We did land, on a field in Austria—everyone on board survived. That was the start of my walk with Christ.

How did it continue in the Czech Republic?

Petra: I attended a few services at a Roman Catholic Church, but it did not feel right. It was a long path, but I eventually found a different church. After meeting Tom, we moved to northern England in 2007. We lived in a small village and attended a Baptist church. Then Tom received a promotion, to be based in either Prague or Istanbul.

So you chose the Czech Republic.

Tom: It was not a ministry calling when we moved to Prague—it was just a job. There was nothing about refugees in the news then, back in 2012.

How did your refugee ministry begin?

Petra: Tom had his marketing position, and I had two part-time jobs. Then in June 2015 I had the feeling of being called for something. It was just, “You will need to leave your jobs, and I will need you.” In the light of previous lessons of obedience in my life, I gave up those two jobs, and we were just waiting. Then we looked at the news on 28 August 2015—it was about the first wave of refugees coming through the Czech Republic from Hungary by train. They were switching trains in Prague and travelling to Berlin. As we watched, my heart just sang, and I knew this was it. “This is what I’m calling you for, I want you to care for these people.” But the pictures from the news report were so violent—“these are evil people, terrorists, this government will save you from them.” So I was anxious. Where would I find them? I would need to go to those places shown on the news. I immediately thought, “No, I’m not doing that.” I did not feel equipped. I had never met anyone from the Middle East. I did not speak their language. I did not know their culture. I thought, “Find a man. Find somebody bigger, stronger.” I did not want to be vulnerable there. But after a lot of prayer that night, I was on the platform at the railway station the next morning, with bread rolls, coffee, and tea.

It was only through this work that I found out how well equipped I was. I had ended up in a country that I did not necessarily choose to be in, and had had to flee. I had a biracial child who was very much bullied at school here because she has a different skin color, a different nose, different hair. And now I had mothers crying to me: “We are so bullied and unaccepted here!” Turning up on a platform with one suitcase of useless things—I was exactly like that. So I was able to share my story and testimony with them—and cry with them.

What was it that made you think this was what you had to do in terms of a Christian response, if the news was saying that these were people we should be protected from?

Petra: This is the fight between respecting your government and following Christ. It is not always a single path. I chose—not to ignore—but not to pay too much attention to

what the government and media were saying, because I had a very strong call to follow Christ in this. And if God was calling me, my prayer was also for Him to protect me.

How did you connect the situation with Christian teaching?

Petra: I saw sons and daughters of Christ. God loves them just as much as He loves me, whether they are now Muslims, or Hindu, or atheists, or whoever they are. They are in

this need right now, this situation, and they are landing on our doorsteps. The government is already labeling them in a certain way. God was calling me to be there, and it was very much to offer material help, as well as to offer Jesus.

How did this develop into your ministry, Dignity?

Petra: In 2015 we worked at Prague Railway Station. We had over 200 volunteers, and we covered the station 24/7. We had signs on us saying, “Help for refugees” in English, Arabic, and Farsi. We faced opposition from Czechs—we were spat upon, shoved, and our stand was demolished several times. People said, “You are a traitor, how dare you betray our country! Why are you helping these people?”

Then in October 2015 the refugees were no longer allowed to transit through the Czech Republic, and the government opened the first detention centers. They were locked up in these centers, so we started to visit them. It was very difficult. We could only have a one-on-one meeting, and so we had to be able to identify the refugee we were visiting. People lost their identity when they were detained, because the government did not believe who they said they were. They either had no papers, or they could have false papers.

(continued on page 10)



Tom and Petra Damms (G. FAGAN)

Damms Interview *(continued from page 9)*

So they were issued with numbers, which were written with a permanent marker on their wrists or ankles at the railway station, children and babies included. They were known by this number, and so we needed to know the relevant number, nationality, and date of birth—then we could visit one-on-one in this prison-like setting. We also had to go through a strip search. None of the detention centers were in Prague, so we were travelling three hours to get there, spending half an hour with one refugee, and then travelling three hours back. The whole day would be gone, and we had visited only one person. It was very difficult and emotionally draining, and we lost lots of volunteers.

This experience turned out to be extremely important, however, because we started to make a database of people in different centers. They were splitting up families, so there were males, females, and unaccompanied minors. If you were a refugee entering a detention center, you had to surrender all your possessions: money, jewelry—including wedding rings, which was very humiliating, especially for the ladies—and cell phones, which meant you had no way to communicate. If the authorities were able to confirm your identity you would be released, but you would be charged a fee, so you left either with no money or in debt. You would

normally be released in the evening—the gate shut behind you and you had no idea where your relatives were and no way of communicating with them.

When we started to hear about these people being released, we went to meet them and brought them to Prague. Volunteers offered accommodations, and we also had interpreters and other services. With a database, we could try to locate other family members. People would leave the detention centers with a so-called exit visa; in practice, this meant that they could stay in the Czech Republic for up to seven days, but then they had to leave. Very rarely we managed to reunite families still in the Czech Republic, but most of the time we would see people off to Germany, stay in touch with them, and reunite them with other family members once they were released. That was the initial work, in 2015 and 2016.

Later, we realized we needed to work on a more solid basis, as a recognized charitable organization. We formally registered Dignity as a non-governmental organization in March 2018. Looking back, obedience was once again crucial here. To start with, I was just an individual, and that is why I was allowed into the detention centers. Organizations were not allowed inside, because they were viewed as a potential threat. But just one woman? “Yeah, just let her in. What can she do?” So if we had been Dignity back then, most likely

we would not have been allowed inside. You don’t see the big picture—you just do what you are called to do.

How has the situation changed since 2016?

Petra: There are now two different types of centers—for detention and for integration. Integration occurs for those who apply for asylum in the Czech Republic. In the early years, nobody wanted to stay in the Czech Republic, as neighboring Germany was like a big, open door. But now the situation has completely reversed.

According to the European Union’s so-called Dublin Regulation, refugees are supposed to stay in the first EU country they enter and claim asylum there. There are also official quotas, according to which refugees are relocated

proportionally across the EU. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland have refused to accept this relocation. However, many refugees were detained, fingerprinted, and documented by the Czech government in 2015, so while it does not make sense geographically, the Czech Republic legally remains the country of entry for them. Germany and Sweden have now started to send refugees back to the Czech Republic as their country of entry, and so we are seeing many people coming back here. Work with them is much more difficult, because they never wanted to be here. In many cases they have lived in Germany or Sweden for months, and have even started to integrate there with



Arabic Bibles (Source: T. DAMMS)

strong community support. Then they end up in a detention center here with zero support. People may be detained for years, and there is heavy overcrowding.

Tom: One detention center in a town called Kostelec is a former prison. It was built for 250 inmates, but the last time we had figures there were 720 asylum seekers there. A smallish room will usually house one family. Single people and couples quite often share rooms. Legally, they are allowed to leave the camp after six months, but in practice they cannot find work as they have limited Czech language skills and an unclear asylum status. Many times we have tried to help people with work, but the potential employer has pointed out that if they invest in the person and train them, they could still be deported within 24 hours. Without work, they cannot find accommodations. It is a vicious circle.

Are these people typically fleeing Syria and Iraq?

Tom: Initially, yes, and also Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine, and Lebanon. But more recently we are seeing a very broad variety. Many come from Venezuela, also former Soviet states such as Ukraine—there are people from Crimea, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. There are also many coming from African countries, such as Eritrea and Sudan. So we are dealing with multiple different languages, religions, and backgrounds. Those from China have usually fled religious

persecution, and we work with a lot of Chinese Christians. In 2017 we also started an Arabic church in Prague—there are now two in the city. One pastor is a German who lived in Lebanon for 23 years, and the second is a refugee himself, from Iraq. This is something we hope will grow. Our vision is of a truly international church.

Petra: It is amazing how God works—you can never predict it. For example, we prayed for one guy in detention who was a trained ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] soldier. We gave him a Bible. He was in very bad shape emotionally because he had been programmed to hurt people. There was a lot of mistrust, and he attempted suicide several times. But we were later told that whenever he felt the need to hurt somebody, he would open this Bible and read it aloud in the detention center, with strong emotion and expression. Some people actually came to Christ through this guy—who did not believe himself, but just felt that there was something strong in the book he was reading which helped him to suppress feelings of wanting to hurt people.

Tom: One lady we work with very closely fled from Iran. Her family followed the stereotypical route of refugees—they arrived in Turkey, where they were trafficked and smuggled in little boats across the Aegean Sea to Greece. They ended up in an apartment in Athens with the smugglers promising to obtain false documents for them to move on. Days turned to weeks, and weeks to months. Interestingly, this lady told us that Bibles in different languages had been placed in this apartment, and the smugglers said

to them: “Learn a few passages of the Bible, because once you reach Germany”—which is usually where refugees want to go—“you can say you are Christian, quote a few Bible verses, and you will have more chance of being granted asylum.” So it was a ploy. When we first heard that, we thought: “That’s terrible, to use the Bible in such a way!” But what this Iranian lady said was: “I’d never had a Bible. I’d heard of Jesus, but it was the first chance I’d had to actually read about this.” When she arrived in the Czech Republic she was detained at the airport, as the false documents she had did not work. She came to Christ in the detention center, through that introduction sitting for months in the Athens apartment, thinking “I need to learn a few verses” and then “Wow, there is something in this!”

What does your current work with refugees consist of?

Tom: There are three ways that we serve: meeting practical needs, emotional needs, and spiritual needs. Refugees are allowed to leave their detention center every two weeks for 24 hours, and we bring different groups of around 30

into Prague. We bring them by train to a church community center, which we rent for the day. We spend the day with them; we cook lunch, eat together, and have a devotional. A pastor from one of the international churches comes, and we pray with and for them.

To meet their practical needs, we run a “free shop” at the community center. We have clothes, toys, and books, including Bibles. There are a lot of newborn babies in the camps, so we supply diapers and formula. But this is also about us forming a relationship of trust. Typically they ask, “What is it that is different about you?” which is an opportunity to talk to them about Christ. But we don’t meet someone and say, “Here’s a Bible, you must read this!”

Roughly what percentage of the people you are dealing with are believers of some sort?

Tom: Most would say “I am X or Y.” In the last group we had, there was a Hindu family, a Muslim family, and a family who were not believers, as well as a Christian family.

But they are generally quite open to being in contact with people of another faith?

Tom: They are. What we find, particularly with those who have fled Syria or Iraq and who are Muslim, is that they tend to have a lot of doubts and questions. They have fled from ISIS, and they say, “I have seen such terrible things done in the name of my God.”

Petra: They are so shattered. They are actually in a much worse state than the Christians who are fleeing, because they are losing their faith, whereas faith is something that the Christians can really lean on.

I think it is key for Christians in Europe to engage right at this moment. They are saying, “Is this the right God? Do I need to kill for Him?” I see this influx of refugees as having two significant aspects for the Church in Europe, and definitely in the Czech Republic. One is a great opportunity to share the Gospel, because these people are coming to us—we do not have to go there. Secondly, it is challenging us as Christians. The Christians who are coming shake local Christians also to think, “Where is my faith? Is my faith a true faith?” There are families who had to stay strong in Christ at gunpoint, who lost family members when people put guns to their heads and told them they had to give up Christ and accept Allah.

Tom: In 2018 I met a pastor from Sweden at a conference. He mentioned the fear people have of refugees coming in, of Christianity dying and Islam taking over. “My church has been revitalized,” he said. Sweden is a very secular society and church attendance has been declining. He said his

(continued on page 12)



Dignity’s free clothing store (Source: T. DAMMS)

Damms Interview *(continued from page 11)*

church was almost empty, but now on a Sunday there are queues down the street to get in, because it has been revitalized by this new refugee community that is so eager to learn and to share.

In fact, the lady from Iran who was in the apartment in Athens is a very powerful evangelist. A group recently visited from the United States, and she asked one of the students: “You are from the U.S., a big Christian nation. What do you do as a Christian?” This teenage girl said, “I go to church, and sometimes I help out with the kids at Sunday school.” This Iranian lady got very emotional. We were watching and overhearing, and we knew what was coming. She stood up and said: “What? You have the Holy Spirit in you. Do you know the power in you, the things you can do?...”

Petra: “...That’s the power that brought Christ from the grave, the power that is in you! You cannot just go to church in a free country, like the U.S.! You need to do more than this!” She was so outraged!



Tom and Petra prepare food parcels for refugees in the Czech Republic during this year’s lockdown due to the coronavirus.

(Source: T. DAMMS)

Yet we often hear political rhetoric that suggests, “We can’t let these people in because we have Christian values here.”

Petra: Who knows? Maybe the situation will settle in 10, 20, or 50 years. Maybe the European Church will strengthen if Christians step up. Muslims who are coming may come to Christ over 20, 50, or 100 years. Who knows what the bigger picture is? But if you are called for something—even if it is just to feed a child on the platform of a railway station—that is your calling. ♦

Christ to the Children: How an Evangelical Initiative Supported Orthodox Sunday Schools in Romania and Beyond

DANUT MANASTIREANU

When it comes to preparing Sunday school curricula for children, Western Evangelicals tend to have both experience and resources. But if they wish to utilize their expertise to assist Orthodox Christians in post-Communist states, they face a formidable challenge: operating in a way that is deemed to be doctrinally sound and culturally appropriate by local church communities. For many years, I was closely involved in one such project, which came to be known as Christ to the Children. I hope that my account of this experience will support those seeking to navigate this delicate sphere.

Phase One: Russia

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1990-91, Bill Greig, Jr.—then head of Gospel Light Publications, an established Evangelical producer of Sunday school material based in California—suggested adapting his organization’s children’s Bible curriculum for use in Orthodox contexts in

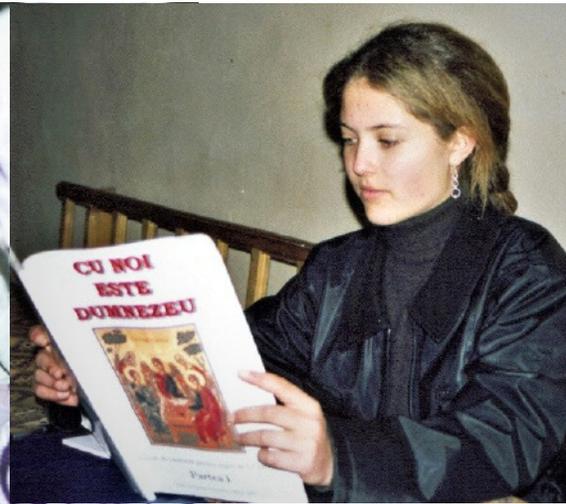
Russia. Work on the project formally began in 1992, and the role of Jim Morgenroth (d. 2019) was crucial in the early stages.¹ An American, Jim was at the time director in Russia for Dorcas, a Dutch humanitarian organization providing aid to the poor of St. Petersburg.² In the more pro-ecumenical climate that existed in Russia immediately following the Soviet collapse, Jim sought and identified several Orthodox bishops open to Bill’s idea and started working with them on the adaptation of Gospel Light material.

Despite a shared biblical background with the Orthodox, the original material was thoroughly Evangelical—a major revision was an absolute must. At this point, another key person joined the project: Dr. Constance Tarasar (d. 2014).³ In 1965 she became the first Orthodox woman in the United States to be awarded a Master of Divinity degree from Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, New York. Her doctoral dissertation of 1989, moreover, proposed

a curriculum design model for Orthodox Christian religious education. Here too she was a pioneer, becoming the first Orthodox Christian educator in the United States to receive a doctorate in the field of education. She was clearly the right person for the task, and gladly accepted the challenge.

By integrating the contemporary pedagogical methodology of Gospel Light with her own vision for Orthodox Christian education, Constance produced the first textbooks of the new Orthodox biblical curriculum. Her basic lesson template—used in every subsequent version of the program—included four elements:

- A biblical text, with the program guiding children through the entire Bible in approximately four years.
- An illustration of the main spiritual and moral lessons of the particular biblical text in the life of an Orthodox saint.
- A playful way of interacting with the content of the lesson, such as a puzzle or crossword.
- A family exercise, which the children had to do at home with the involvement of their parents and siblings.



Viewing *Christ to the Children* materials, Romania (Source: D. MANASTIREANU)

The program projected the creation of a total of 12 textbooks for age groups ranging from six to 17 years old, to be used as Sunday school material in Orthodox parishes. Once Constance retired from active ministry, production of this material was taken on by another woman specializing in Christian education, this time an Oriental Orthodox of the Armenian Apostolic Church: Sirarpi Aivazian. Other contributors included a Chicago-based priest of the Orthodox Church in America, Fr. John Matusiak (d. 2019).

Once the first textbooks were complete—including guides for both students and teachers—an adaptation and translation process started in Russia, again with funding provided by Gospel Light. Unfortunately, however, the climate for such ecumenical initiatives deteriorated steadily during the 1990s. In part, this was due to the local assumption that Western Christian missions in Russia were proselytizing, or “poaching” from the Orthodox flock. The Russian Orthodox Church also increasingly preferred to rely upon support from those holding political power, as in the tsarist period. (The Church’s sustained lobbying efforts to introduce spiritual education through a government-funded Orthodox Culture program in public schools met with success in 2010.)⁴ What had started out as a promising educational project thus met with insurmountable obstacles. The program was eventually sidelined and, despite initial promise and repeated efforts to revive the project, never received the seal of approval from the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Phase Two: Romania

The focus of the project then switched to Romania. While in Russia in the early 1990s, Jim Morgenroth had met Christopher Shore, a Canadian Mennonite working to provide microloans to the poor. Chris followed the development of the Orthodox biblical curriculum with great interest, but was forced to leave Russia after several years due to threats from the local mafia. I knew Chris personally, as we had both been involved in the ministry of the Navigators when he lived

for a few years as an undercover missionary in Communist Romania.⁵ In late 1997, in my capacity as a board member of World Vision Romania, I was pleased to endorse Chris as our new national director.

Among Chris’s first initiatives in that role was to invite Bill Greig, Jr., and Jim Morgenroth to Bucharest in January 1998 in order to explore the possibility of transplanting the thwarted curriculum project from Russia to Romania. During our discussion we agreed that the best vehicle for this venture was probably the Lord’s Army, a pietistic renewal movement within the Romanian Orthodox Church that had recently emerged from the catacombs after the fall of Communism.

Fr. Vasile Mihoc, a renowned biblical scholar and head of the Lord’s Army, was also a member of our board. He agreed that he and his team would take on the adaptation of the biblical curriculum for the Romanian context, with support from World Vision. Starting with the English templates created by Dr. Tarasar, the title chosen for the program was *Christ to the Children*. After approximately two years, however, it became apparent that the Lord’s Army movement did not have the required expertise or sophistication to run the program on the huge scale required. We also discovered that mainstreaming the program was extremely difficult, given that the Lord’s Army was still facing opposition from some bishops within the Romanian Orthodox Church. The project consequently stalled for a time.

(continued on page 14)

Christ to the Children *(continued from page 13)*

The next phase of the project commenced in 2001, with the Romanian Orthodox Church as partner following approval by its Holy Synod. Funding was provided by World Vision Romania thanks to a special grant obtained from a foundation in the United States. This was the point in the project when production of the curriculum was taken over by a team led by Ms. Sirarpi Aivazian.

Phase Three: Five More Post-Communist States

Building on the success of the project in Romania, World Vision's regional office for the Middle East and Eastern Europe came to an agreement with Gospel Light to provide joint funding to extend the program to other countries in its purview, including to non-Orthodox churches if at all possible. Gospel Light proved unable to continue the project, however, and transferred copyright of the curriculum to World Vision, while our attempts to promote the program in other churches met with little interest.⁶ By contrast, Orthodox in the region—both Eastern and Oriental—were extremely keen to receive this type of catechetical material, as it met a real need—at least in the immediate post-Communist context—following decades of atheist prohibition of such activities. As a result, Christ to the Children was progressively introduced in Armenia, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, and Georgia, in addition to Lebanon, where it served Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Christians.⁷

Adaptation of the curriculum was performed by teams appointed by the Orthodox hierarchy in each country, while the logistic co-ordination of the program was provided by the Faith and Development team of World Vision—of

which I was director, with Jim Morgenroth as manager. Each year we organized a “training of trainers” event in one of the countries involved, with participants coming together to report on progress and to ensure that the quality of the program was maintained and augmented.

While bishops in some of these countries tried to use the curriculum for teaching religion in public schools, Christ to the Children was in fact designed from the outset as a parish-based program. This was due to our conviction that the local Christian community is the right space for the spiritual formation of children. While Orthodox churches were eager to benefit from the program, they rarely invested funds to support it, with the exception of Romania and—to a certain extent—Armenia. The reason given for this was the relative poverty of the churches concerned, but this contributed to funders beginning to doubt the sustainability of the project, and over time sources of funding dried up. In 2012 World Vision conducted an evaluation of the project, and in 2014 decided to stop funding it, allowing local churches to take it over. Currently, Christ to the Children materials are still being used in Albania, Armenia, and Georgia, for as long as supplies last.

Lessons Learned

Numerous valuable findings and observations made in the course of the project were underscored during the evaluation process:

- The need for children's biblical education, and for catechism in general, is still great in most Orthodox churches—both Eastern and Oriental, especially as such activities were outlawed for many decades during the Communist period.
- Although a certain tradition of children's catechism existed before Communism—especially in matters of doctrine and practice, but less so in terms of biblical knowledge—this was virtually lost prior to 1989. The program initiated by Gospel Light and funded by World Vision contributed greatly to its revival and further development.
- Very few Orthodox fully grasp the importance of child catechism for the future of their church in the context of the rapid re-secularization of post-Communist societies.
- Following the fall of Communism, Orthodox churches focused their recovery efforts upon their buildings. Very few resources were invested in the “soft” dimension of church life—including children's education—on the grounds that the churches could not afford to do so.
- Religious education was reintroduced into public schools in much of the region after 1989. As the related expenses were covered by state budgets, all churches—not just Orthodox—favored this approach,



Jim Morgenroth in Georgia with American Orthodox priest Fr. Theodore Niklasson (left), and in Armenia with Sirarpi Aivazian and Romanian Orthodox priest Fr. Viorel Sava (right)
(Source: D. MANASTIREANU)

despite its obvious inadequacy in terms of transmitting the essentials of the faith to the next generation.

- While ecumenism continues to be viewed with suspicion by most Orthodox people in Eastern Europe, many concrete needs of Orthodox churches in the region were met with financial contributions from ecumenical partners, as was the Christ to the Children program.

- Flexibility to alter the curriculum in ways that better fit the reality on the ground proved necessary. The original design of Christ to the Children involved each parish establishing a religious education model resembling the school system, with 12 or 13 classes. However, no Orthodox parish ever had the facilities or the number of teachers—let alone children—required for this. As a result, the children were taught in two or three mixed age groups, with the curriculum adapted to meet their needs.

- Similarly, the management of the program by World Vision as designed by Jim Morgenroth operated from the premise that each country would need approximately the same amount of financial resources for the curriculum adaptation process. In practice, however, the costs of the process (salaries, materials, etc.) proved very different in each country, and there were also great variations in the size of local Orthodox populations.

(spoken in Lebanon and large areas of the Lebanese diaspora) and Eastern Armenian (spoken within Armenia itself)—compounded by the existence of two Armenian Catholicosates [ecclesial governing bodies]—eventually led to the demise of the program in Lebanon. Similarly, suspicions between the Orthodox in Bosnia and Serbia led to the dismissal—unjust, in my view—of the World Vision and Orthodox program co-ordinators.

- Perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of the project was the formation in each country of a group of local Orthodox professionals dedicated to children’s catechism. Supported by World Vision’s annual “training of trainers” events, its purpose was to ensure the certification of teachers, to monitor progress, and to provide regular training. Except in Romania, this did not come to fruition due to the cessation of funding.

- An incidental benefit of the program was the creation in every country involved of a network of Orthodox experts in children’s catechism, which fueled the sharing of encouragement and experience among the various national churches. However, this proved to be insufficiently developed to be sustainable without World Vision’s logistic support, and it virtually ceased once funding was discontinued.



Participants in (left) and Sirarpi Aivazian teaching at (right) Christ to the Children Teacher Training Conference in Yerevan, Armenia, May 2004 (Source: D. MANASTIREANU)

- The success of the program in each national context fundamentally depended upon the commitment of the local Orthodox hierarchy to the centrality of child catechism in the life of their church. In Lebanon, for example, the Eastern Orthodox variant of the program abruptly ceased operations when the priest in charge of it left the country, and his bishop did not appoint anyone to continue the work. In Romania, by contrast, the vision and commitment of Patriarch Daniel has proved key to the program’s survival despite many difficulties, as well as to its current success.

- World Vision’s centralized approach towards problem-solving due to its pyramid structure meant that some contextual difficulties were not resolved. For example, the linguistic difference between Western Armenian

- Overall, the impact of the program depended upon three essential criteria: the quality of the teaching materials; the quality of the methodological training for teachers, and the degree to which the program was integrated into official church structures.

A Modest Triumph

Romania is the only country where the program has been fully incorporated into the life of the local Orthodox Church. A strong ecclesial infrastructure exists to support the project: each eparchy, or diocese, has a catechism department with staff who are paid by the church to coordinate the religious education of children within parishes.

(continued on page 16)

In 2019 the Romanian Orthodox Church organized its 12th annual congress dedicated to the promotion of our project.⁸ A commission appointed by Patriarch Daniel is currently working to redesign the curriculum, incorporating findings from previous phases of the program and the latest pedagogical insights, and also with a view to contextualizing it fully in church life.

For as long as this program lasted in the various countries, the lives of tens of thousands of Orthodox children were touched. I believe it also played a crucial role in the reconstruction of the Church in post-Communist contexts. Most Orthodox churches are still not able to support such a significant effort financially or in other ways, and they still do not fully grasp the need in the area of children's catechization. Yet wherever such a conviction does exist, as it does in Romania, the thoughtful catechization of Orthodox children is assured—and with it, perhaps, the very existence of the Church in years to come. ♦



Notes:

¹ Jim's obituary may be found at <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/journaltimes/obituary.aspx?pid=193147919>.

² <https://russia.dorcas.org/tag/orphans-en/>.

³ Fuller information about Dr. Constance Tarasar and her contribution to Orthodox Christian education may be found at <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/constance-tarasar>.

⁴ Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia—Religious Policy after Communism*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 141-51.

⁵ For further information on the work of the Navigators, see Milan Cichel with Geraldine Fagan, "Before and After 1968: One Spiritual Journey in Communist Czechoslovakia," *East-West Church Report*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2018), 1-5.

⁶ Gospel Light went into bankruptcy in 2015. It was bought subsequently by the Christian publisher David C. Cook, but the Orthodox biblical curriculum project was not reintroduced.

⁷ There have also been attempts to extend the program to Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Poland, and Ukraine, as well as Egypt, the UK, and the USA.

⁸ In 2018 Sorin-Constantin Lungoci defended a Ph.D. thesis at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, entitled *Hristos împărtăşit copiilor—rediviva catehizării parohiale: Context, conţinut, strategii didactice*. It analyzes the history and perspectives of the Christ to the Children program within the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Danut Manastireanu is an Anglican theologian from Iaşi, Romania, with a keen interest in Evangelical-Orthodox dialogue.

(Left to right) Sirarpi Aivazian, Karine Harutunyan—World Vision Armenia Faith and Development Coordinator—and the author, Danut Manastireanu. (Source: D. MANASTIREANU)

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