The Role of Prešov Bishop Pavol Gojdič in the Defence of the Religious Freedom of the Greek Catholics in Czechoslovakia

Abstract

Pavel Gojdič, the bishop of Prešov, is now perceived by Slovak society as a symbol of the struggle against fascism and communism in the 20th century. The bishop's actions and opinions strengthened his contemporaries in the struggle for religious freedom, and even today he is an inspiration in the defense of democracy. In the 20th century, he played a key role in the Greek Catholic Church with an outreach to the whole of society. He was able to actively speak out in favor of the persecuted Jews and during the communist period he resisted the oppression of the regime in order to save the maximum of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. The text of the article highlights his significant role in the defense of religious freedom under both political regimes. It cites specific events that highlighted his views. Particular attention is paid to the process of

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interrogation and his imprisonment, where he was subjected to torture and oppression by the communist regime. Ten years in prison enhanced the positive features of his personality and left a strong legacy in the memory of his fellow prisoners and society, who learned of his fate vicariously after his martyrdom and during the beatification process in the 1990s.

**Keywords**

Gojdič, Greek Catholic Church, Racism, Communism, Czechoslovakia

The November Revolution in 1989, which meant the fall of the communist regime, gave the representatives of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia the opportunity to freely express their demands. On 4 December, an assembly of clergy issued a statement in which they expressed their support of the demands of the Civic Forum and the Public Against Violence. They also formulated their own demands. One of them was the rehabilitation of Bishop Pavel Gojdič (which was achieved in September 1990) and others unjustly prosecuted and condemned by the communist regime. The fact that the bishop’s name was in the first place was not a coincidence, but a reflection of the general awareness of the importance of his personality and merits for Greek Catholics (Slovo, 1989). In the 1990s, his life stories were known mainly among Christians in Czechoslovakia. Shortly after assuming the presidency, on 28 October 1991, President Václav Havel awarded him the Order of T.G. Masaryk, Second Class, in memoriam, in recognition of his struggle for religious freedom and democracy. The bishop’s name gradually became more familiar thanks to the ongoing process of beatification in St. Peter’s Square in Rome, which was completed in 2001. His inclusion in the list of the beatified made his cult possible in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and among Greek Catholics in the world, especially in the USA. During the beatification, his role in the struggle against communism, his fidelity to God and the Church were emphasized (Šturák, 2013).
In the period of unfreedom

Bishop Gojdič also took important stands against fascism, another totalitarian regime of the 20th century. In 2007, his role in saving the Jews in Slovakia was recognized by the State of Israel with the award of the Righteous Among the Nations in memoriam.

His struggle with the regime of the Slovak state is illustrated by Bishop Gojdič’s interpretation of the main Christian commandment and a comparison with the explanation of the same commandment by the president of the Slovak state, the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso. During a speech in Holič in 1942, he said that for the sake of love for ourselves we should eliminate the enemy – meaning the Jews. Bishop Gojdič expressed the opposite when he replied to the priest Michal Mašlej when asked about helping the Jews, that the love of God obliges us to help the Jews (Vitko (ed.), 2019).

Gojdič’s critical attitude towards the policy of the Slovak state was already evident from January 1939, when he issued a pastoral letter condemning racial politics and warning priests against involvement in this political direction. The letter is of a universal character, condemning Nazi ideology, and in it, the bishop defends all people who are persecuted for various reasons because of their racial affiliation (AGAP, f. PS, sign. 8, year 1939). Since the establishment of the Slovak autonomous government in 1938 and later of the Slovak state in 1939, he faced the hostility of the regime, but also of part of the Greek-Catholic clergy, who relied on the support of the government and demanded his replacement because of his attitudes towards Ruthenians and Jews.

The bishop faced the hostile behavior of the top leaders of the Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party (in Slovak: HSĽS) at both regional and national level. He was monitored by the secret police of the State Security Headquarters, and financial contributions to Greek Catholic institutions were cut. Even for a short time the bishop was not paid congrua – the salary of a clergyman. The government made it clear that the situation could be changed if the bishop resigned his office, what he did at the end of 1939, but in July 1940 Pope Pius XII elevated him from administrator to the seat bishop of Prešov. In doing so, he also expressed his support for Gojdič’s attitudes on
national issues. The bishop therefore had strained relations with President Jozef Tiso, Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka, Interior Minister Alexander Mach, and the mayors of Šariš-Zemplín County, Štefan Hašík and Andrej Dudáš. The tension was also reflected in the failure to invite representatives of the state authorities, the HSĽS and the Hlinka Guard to the enthronement of the bishop on 8 September 1940 (Borza, 2017).

In spite of the adversity, Bishop Gojdič, thanks to the constant support of the Holy See, was able to work in Slovakia until the end of the Second World War, and by his personal attitudes represented by his statements and deeds; he helped, together with priests and believers, to save several hundred Jews. I will give one example for all of them. He saved ten people from the Spitzer family. He was associated with Paul Spitzer by an unusual incident when he defended him in the street during a raid by the Hlinka Guard. They were walking together through the streets of Prešov, where the guardsmen began to catch Jews. Bishop Gojdič, in order to defend Pavel, put one arm around his shoulders and together they walked through the guardsmen, who did not dare to intervene against a Catholic bishop walking with a Jew (Borza, 2017).

The bishop’s clear positions in favor of the Jews and later his support for the resistance did not go unnoticed after the end of the war and resonated in society. The name Gojdič was associated in government circles with the attribute of anti-fascist fighter. General Ludvík Svoboda gave him a Mercedes car for the needs of the bishopric (Potas, 2001). On 29 August 1947, on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising, the President of the Republic Eduard Beneš awarded nineteen Greek Catholic priests for outstanding merits for the liberation of the Czechoslovak Republic. Three were awarded the Czechoslovak War Cross 1939 and sixteen others the Czechoslovak Medal of Merit I. Grade (Osobní, 1947; VHA, f. ovo, file no. 56246/47). However, the period of grace was short-lived and was replaced by a discrediting campaign directed against the Greek Catholic Church and its bishop. Gojdič’s brave stand during the war fell into oblivion for a long time, but he remained consistent even in the face of the new totalitarian communist regime. In August 1948, before the commander of the State Security Service in Prešov,
Captain Kubik, he said: “We, the Church, cannot agree with your regime, with the communists, because you are materialists and atheists” (Šturák, 2013, pp. 85–86).

The reason for the change was Moscow’s plan to strengthen its influence in Czechoslovakia through the Orthodox Church. After the successful liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church, the latter was supposed to take over its believers and structure. The operation was to be carried out in a seemingly legitimate manner, following the liquidation model of the Union in Lvov. Moscow managed to take control of the Orthodox Church by installing bishops and affiliating them to the Moscow Patriarchate (Marek-Ľupčo, 2014). Several signals from abroad warned of the imminent danger to the Greek Catholics in Czechoslovakia. The liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church at the fake Lvov Sobor (council) in 1946 made Gojdič and the church leadership vigilant, but their confidence in a democratic Czechoslovakia strengthened their conviction that such a thing could not happen in the restored republic (Vaško, 1990). However, Bishop Gojdič asked Rome for an auxiliary bishop, who became Vasil Hopko (Borza, 2003). A much more serious event was the arrest of the Prague parish priest Basilian Pankratius Huček in March 1947 and the accusation of supporting the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Mandzák-Borza, 2018).

The murder of Bishop Teodor Romža of Mukachevo on the night of 31 October to 1 November 1947 marked a turning point in the perception of reality on the side of Bishop Gojdič. The specific raids by state security against Greek Catholic monks and nuns in July 1948 had already led him to protest to the President of the Republic and to implement important measures. First and foremost, he promoted intensive catechization of the faithful so that they would be able to face the new conditions. He also proceeded to take concrete steps in organizing the church in a situation where the bishop and other church leaders would be removed. He created a system for the jurisdiction transfer and designated specific individuals as his representatives. The well-set up system had a crack in that the State Security intensively worked out the leadership of the Greek Catholic Church and one of the possible successors sided with the communist regime. On the day of the Sobor, the director
of the bishop’s office, Ján Kokinčák, voluntarily handed over the keys from the bishop’s office and later became one of the leading members of the Orthodox Church. Thus, Bishop Gojdič’s plan was known (Pešek-Barnovský, 1999). In 1950, after the fake Sobor of Prešov, both Bishops Gojdič and Hopko were arrested, as well as others of the deputies, Mikuláš Rusnák and Michal Sabadoš, fled to Hungary. However, the format of successors continued despite the revelation, when auxiliary bishop Vasiľ Hopko appointed priest Ivan Ljavinec to the position of vicar general during his internment in Hlohovec. Ljavinec acquired jurisdiction over the entire Greek Catholic Church and actively exercised it for the next five years until his arrest. In collaboration with the priests, he ensured the Greek Catholic Church operated in secret (Letz, 2001).

From the beginning, Bishop Gojdič faced pressure to convert to the Orthodox Church, which he refused. His personal testimony played an essential role in the decision of the priests and especially of the faithful who were officially converted to the Orthodox Church by the state power. The only way to express dissent was to refuse a position of Orthodox priest in the parish, to practice religious acts on one’s own, or to practically observe the Catholic faith through the reception of the sacraments from the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the faithful and priests yielded to the pressure of the regime and accepted the new conditions in the Orthodox Church. They were the focus of the work of Ivan Ljavinec, who achieved the return of many clergy and faithful back to fidelity to the Pope (Hirka, 2013).

The life in prison

After his arrest on 28 April 1950 (Mandzák, 2014), Bishop Gojdič found himself in isolation in Slávik’s villa on Štrbské Pleso (Lake). The now abandoned villa is located on the western side of Štrbské Pleso at a safe distance from the nearest dwellings. The isolation suited the State Security officers to undisturbed influence on the detained bishop and to achieve his conversion to Orthodoxy. A potential achieving of his conversion to the Orthodox Church would, in their plans, facilitate the liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church and lead to less resistance from the priests and faithful. Bishop Gojdič was
aware of this, and during his imprisonment he confided to a fellow prisoner that he had been promised the position of Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Czechoslovakia by members of the State Security Service, but that he had firmly refused the offer (Potaš, 2001). We do not know much about what was going on in the villa, but the isolation under immediate control lasted for more than a month, when he was escorted to the internment monastery in Báč in June. After a week, on 16 June, he was taken to the prison in Valdice near Jičín (Czechia). Here, he was interrogated and held in the correctional wing, dark casemates (underground tunnels) in solitary confinement. In July 1950 he was already interrogated in Prague’s Ruzyně (ABS, f. 323, sign. 323-15-13), where he was subjected, together with other bishops, to cruel torture and preparation for the trial against the treasonous bishops, who had been approved in advance by the security commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Today we know that the interrogators used a pre-prepared method of torture. They did not plan to break Bishop Gojdič only by physical torture; that would have jeopardized the promotional purpose of the upcoming trial, where he could have withdrawn his confession. They could not afford such a risk, so in addition to physical violence, they used isolation, sleep deprivation, and minimized food ration. The main goal was to break Bishop Gojdič psychologically and use the method of brainwashing to make him testify according to the ideas and plan of the State Security Service (Pinerová, 2017). The bishop wrote about his interrogation in Valdice:

Day and night I had to walk or stand in the middle of the room. They kept banging on the door or the retractable window – one after the other, even eight times, and I always had to report. One night they made me do 5600 squats in the casemates, and after every thousand squats I had to report to the commander of the guards. At the beginning of this squat comedy, three men came to see how an old man of 62 would do squats, but when I had done about 60 squats and was already sweating, they magnanimously forgave me the rest. Once they grabbed me by the shirt below my throat, shook me, and kicked me when I fell to the ground (AÚPN, f. KS ZNB S-ŠTB Košice, inv. no. V-745/2).
After eight months of imprisonment and torture, he was so mentally exhausted that he could no longer resist the interrogator. They woke him up in the middle of the night and presented him with a 45-page report, asking him to sign it in full because the contents could no longer be changed. The investigator announced that the protocol had already been approved by higher authorities and he had to pass it on at eight in the morning. The bishop nevertheless defended himself that the contents of the report were false, but the investigator threatened to correct him: “I knew well the ways of my investigating officer, who was good to me only when I approved everything he wanted and invented. At the slightest resistance on my part, when I demanded the true facts, he turned into a bad person, roared at me, threatened me with a 14th-day correction, from which I would supposedly come out “green as grass” (AÚPN, f. KS ZNB s-ŠTB Košice, inv. no. v-745/2).

On the verge of a mental and physical breakdown, fearful of being put in a dark cell and tortured, he signed the submitted protocol. It contained some basis of truth, but malicious intention was attributed to the facts stated. For example, priests fleeing the Red Army from Poland at the end of World War II, whom he placed in parishes, were “Banderites” according to the investigator, and Gojdič was setting up a “Banderite network,” the standard information sent to the Holy See was “espionage reports,” and that money sent from the U.S. faithful to repair war-damaged buildings was used by the bishop to support the Banderite movement. These deliberate lies became the basis of the state court’s judgment. In 1956, during his imprisonment, he wrote a letter to the President about his investigation, “As the President could witness from my respectful lines, my investigation was not about investigating the truth, but to use all means to destroy, and especially to remove from office, by lawful means, a man whose only ‘crime’ was that he had not left his church, that he had not renounced his religious convictions.” (AÚPN, f. KS ZNB s-ŠTB Košice, inv. no. v-745/2).

Three days before the so-called ‘Sobor of Prešov’, he was called upon to convert to the Orthodox Church. When he refused, he was arrested by the State Security Service on the day of the transfer on 28 April 1950. During the investigation, they informed him several times that if he converted to the Orthodox Church, they would terminate the investigation immediately. From the eventual
transfer, the State Security Service hoped to strengthen the transfer action and calm the situation in eastern Slovakia. Bishop Gojdič, however, refused the transfer offers and therefore they followed the proven method. The investigator gained control over the bishop and, after signing the manipulated protocol, obtained a promise from him that he would stick to the protocol text in court, which, according to the investigator, was supposed to be to his advantage (AÚPN, f. KS ZNB s-ŠTB Košice, inv. no. V-745/2). For the most part, Bishop Gojdič kept to this during the trial, but the report shows that he did declare his innocence on some points. However, this did not affect the outcome of the trial because the verdict had already been decided in advance by the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Letz, 2007).

The staged trial itself took place on 10–13 January 1951 in Bratislava, where three Catholic bishops, Pavel Gojdič, Michal Buzalka and Ján Vojtaššák, appeared before the Senate of the State Court in Bratislava. Among the absurd accusations made against Bishop Gojdič during the staged trial were the accusation of collaboration with Germany and the regime of the Slovak state. The verdict of the court from 15 January 1951 sentenced him to life imprisonment, confiscation of property, a fine of 200,000 CZK and loss of civil rights. His imprisonment was counted from 17 July 1950 and by 1960 he alternated prisons in Valdice, Leopoldov, Ilava and again Leopoldov (AZVIS, f. OS, 60/16). The conditions of communist imprisonment have already been described by several authors, whether it was the memoirs of political prisoners or the analyses of historians who agreed on the continued dehumanization and abuse of political convicts. Prisoner Gojdič had to adapt to the prison order and the attitude of the guards. In his favor were the monastic experience and the community of political prisoners who supported each other. In an agonizing environment, the presence of fellow priests, Christians and people of good will was a precious source of strength to overcome the hardships of prison life. In an effort to preserve his personal identity, the bishop devoted time to prayer, the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for fellow prisoners, and the humble celebration of the Holy Liturgy. These activities were very dangerous, as their
revelations were followed by punishment (Piner, 2017). For example, the Redemptorist Metod Dominik Trčka was sent to correction for singing a prayer during Christmas and died as a result (Mandzák, 2006). Gojdič also underwent punishment for celebrating the Holy Liturgy. Chief Sykora in Ilava wrote about him:

Culturally and politically, he does not show any activity in favor of socialist discipline, he appears hostile to our establishment in that he tries to introduce the ideology of obscurantism among the prisoners in various ways. He devotes his free time only to prayer and various unhealthy speeches which are harmful to our establishment. He only associates with convicts who do not wish our people’s democratic establishment. He does not admit his criminal activities and says that what he has done, he has done with human and religious feeling for his fellow man, not with the intention of subversion (AZVJS, f. OS, 60/16).

In prison, he and others were able to organize a secret priestly ordination, and he treated his fellow prisoners collegially with a sincere concern for their fate (Pinerová, 2017). They tried to help him in every way they could, and this was also due to the fact that he was often ill. A testimony about him was written by a fellow prisoner from Ilava, the prominent academic painter Erwin Pföhl, known for his artistic rendering of glass vases:

My first encounter with Bishop Gojdič dates back to the winter of 1955–1956. In January 1956, I was given the task of painting a large representative plaque for the District Court in Žilina. Since I could only do it in a heated room, I was given one and worked in it from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. One morning, when I was arriving, I was asked by a fellow inmate, Dr. Anton Neuwirt, to take Bishop Gojdič into this heated room. The other cells and the premises were not heated during the day and, as Dr. Neuwirt explained to me, the Bishop’s health was very weak and he would need the warmth of the heated room urgently.

Pföhl succeeded in persuading the prison authorities to provide Bishop Gojdič as his assistant, and so they were both grateful for
During his recovery, he offered me, as a caregiver, his assistance where physical help was needed. He went from bed to bed and had an ear for all the mental difficulties of his fellow prisoners. He made no distinctions between people, to him all were equal. He assisted me wherever he could and tried to help even in the daily cleaning of the room for the sick, taking a bucket and rag without hesitation and wiping the large room with me, as the sick were often confined to bed. It is the hospital bed of the prisoner that lends itself to bringing his desperate position to the deepest consciousness. It was in this situation that the greatness of Bishop Gojdič’s soul was truly shown, as he then sat for hours on the edge of the desperate man’s bed and restored him to hope and trust. Tirelessly and heedlessly of himself, he often went from bed to bed to help the other as a true advocate of Christian love for his neighbor and setting them an example. (oAA, Collected Works)

He was usually housed in a ward for priests and clergy, which fellow prisoners called the Vatican. The prison authorities created a separate ward so that they would not influence the other prisoners. Communication with the outside world was provided by limited correspondence with Brother Štefan and Sister Helena. In his censored letters, he took a sincere interest in the relatives and fellow Basilians and priests. He could reveal only little of his prison life, and so he often stated that he was reconciled to his fate, that he perceived his stay in prison as a fulfillment of God’s will, and that he was inwardly calm and peaceful. He also used the time to read literature from the prison library. He read in German and Hungarian, such as Bleak House by Charles Dickens. Naturally, the censored correspondence lacks references to authentic prison conditions, but his desire for letters or the most detailed portrayal of life outside prison is testimony to the anxieties and loneliness he experienced. This, too, was part of prison life (oAA, Collected Works). Bishop attempted a retrial in 1956 and looked forward with great hope to an amnesty in 1960. By then, however, he was suffering from an incurable illness as a result of this modest shared fortune. In April 1956 they met again in the prison hospital, where Pföhl was working as an orderly and Bishop Gojdič was there as a patient. He recalled this period by saying:
of his imprisonment, to which he succumbed on his birthday, 17 July 1960 (Potáš, 2001).

Both the prison officials and the representatives of the communist regime feared his influence even after his death. Therefore, they refused to release the body to the family and he was buried in the prison cemetery in Leopoldov in grave number 681. After his death, his fellow prisoners realized the significance of his death, spontaneously proclaimed him a martyr, and diligently took care of his grave so that he would not fall into oblivion. The coffin was fitted with a small window for the purpose of recognition during exhumation. This was done in 1968 after the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. His remains were transferred by fellow Basilians and priests to the cathedral church in Prešov, where they were briefly displayed for the worship of the faithful. Due to their large number, communist officials ordered them to be placed in a crypt and restricted public access (Šturák, 2013).

Even though there was a prohibition on the publication of information about Bishop Gojdič at all times, his memory and testimony of loyalty to the Pope survived among the clergy and faithful. This was reflected in the public statements of the clergy mentioned in the introduction of the study. Today, the personality of Bishop Gojdič is the object of a cult, but he is also an important measure of the attitudes of priests and the faithful towards the exercise of freedom, democracy and human rights.

**Conclusion**

Bishop Pavel Gojdič played a key role in the Greek-Catholic Church in the 20th century with an impact on the whole society. He was able to actively speak out in favor of the persecuted Jews and during the communist period he resisted the oppression of the regime in order to save the maximum of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. His timely and accurate naming of the problems in society formed the basis for decisive action by the priests and faithful he addressed. Between 1939 and 1945, they succeeded in saving hundreds of Jewish lives and in establishing a significant value credit for the Greek
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Catholic Church as a whole also in the future. Immediately after the end of the war, after the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia came to power, Bishop Gojdič, together with Bishop Vasiľ Hopko and others, sided with justice and rejected the violent abolition of the Greek Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. Gojdič has become a symbol of resistance and the effort for renewal. The way he lived in prison was engraved in the memory of his fellow prisoners and completed the overall image of a brave man who faced the unjust actions of the regime because of his unwavering attitude to his faith. Naturally, after his death, he became a point of support for like-minded people, even becoming the object of a martyr cult for the faithful. Today, his life story is seen as an example of the struggle for freedom, democracy and human rights.

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