2-2009

"La Slovacchia e la Santa Sede nel XX secolo: Atti del Convegno promosso dall'Ambasciata della Repubblica Slovacca presso la Santa Sede in occasione del V anniversario della firma dell'Accordo Base tra la Repubblica Slovacca e la Santa Sede. [Slovakia and the Holy See in the XX century]" - Book Review

Francesco La Rocca
University of Bologna, Italy

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol29/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
religions, especially those of Abrahamic origin often have very similar positions, be they positive or negative, regarding the same question. And it is quite an irony that many wars in this world were often fought between the Abrahamic religions that have more in common with each other than with any other religion. It goes to show that sometimes people of different religions and beliefs do not adhere to even the basic tenets of their religion and beliefs, and how they even go as far as to do exactly the contrary as to what was advised or even enjoined upon them by their religion.

He concludes by saying that tolerance by itself is not enough for a stable society. What needs to be done is to move on from the already common presumption of the existence of ‘one truth, one religion’ (p.302), and to move to a broader acceptance of ‘many truths, many religions’ (p.302). Only in this way will people learn to accept ‘others’ as fellow brethren and sisters.


Slovakia is a country which only recently has been able to attain independence: until then Slovaks have always been, with rare exceptions, subject to several foreign political and cultural influences. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovaks lived together with Czechs in a new state named Czechoslovakia, a state which lasted, with the exception of the creation of the short-lived Slovak Republic (1939-1945), until 1992. Then, pushed by the events that occurred with the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, Czechs and Slovaks agreed to divide Czechoslovakia into two independent states.

The Holy See has been assuredly an important actor in the events of Slovak history. The pontiffs paid always attention to this Catholic Slavic people, especially in the 20th century. The Holy See recognized the independence of Slovakia on the 1st of January 1993, and in 2000 a Basic Treaty regarding the status of the Catholic Church in Slovakia was signed. In order to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Treaty, on the 24th of November 2005 the Slovak Embassy to the Holy See promoted a conference on the history of the relations between the Vatican and the Slovaks during the past century. At the conference, held at the Augustinianum Patristic Institute in Rome, several scholars from Slovakia and Italy took part, who reconstructed the history of the relations between Rome and Bratislava from the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the most recent agreements between the Church and the Slovak Republic. *La Slovacchia e la Santa Sede nel XX secolo* [Slovakia and the Holy See in XX century] is a collection of the papers presented at that occasion.

The papers, some in English and some in Italian, are organized according to the main topics which have been analysed, during the congress, in four different sessions. The first session was focused on the relations between Slovakia and the Holy See immediately after World War I. At that time, the popes had to face not only the old problems related with the Slovak Church, i.e. the low quality of the local clergy and the tensions between the Slovak Catholics and their Hungarian bishops, but also the new problems born with the end of the Habsburg Empire and the formation of the new state of Czechoslovakia. Andreas Gottmann (Historical Institute at the Austrian Cultural Institute in Rome) and L’uboslav Hromjak (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome) reconstruct the difficult situation of Slovaks during the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while the relations between the Holy See and the new Czechoslovak government, as well as the new points of tension, are described by Emilia Hrabovec (University of Vienna and University of Trnava). Both papers refer to important primary sources like the archives of the Apostolic Nunciature in Vienna and the Vatican Secret Archive.

In the second session authors analysed the turbulent years of World War II, when a first Slovak state lead by Mons. Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest who became Prime Minister in 1939 backed
by Hitler’s Germany, was born. This controversial period, full of ambiguities for the Slovak Church, is described by Róbert Letz (Faculty of Pedagogy at Comenius University, Bratislava) and Ivar Šraffa (Institute of Political Science at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava). In particular, they point out the tension which arose between the Vatican and Bratislava when Tiso’s government passed the so-called Jewish Code in 1941 and decided on the deportation of 57,628 Slovak Jews in 1942.

The Soviet age and the harsh persecution of the Church committed by Communists in Slovakia, which was again part of Czechoslovakia, was the theme of the third session. The five papers of this session deal with pretty different aspects of that period. The first one, written by the Apostolic Nuncio and Consultor of the Vatican Secretariat of State Mons. Dominik Hrušovský, is a precious historical witness of the birth and development of the Slovak Institute of Sts. Cyril & Methodius in Rome, the centre of Slovak Catholicism during the Cold War. Mons. Hrušovský, who was the rector of the Institute from 1973 to 1992, recounts passionately the difficulties and the successes of that group of priests who fought to preserve the faith of their people in their country and abroad when it was heavily menaced by the Communist regime.

The other four papers deal with the Czechoslovak secret services and the Second Vatican Council, the relations of the Holy See-Slovakia during the years 1945-1992, the Greek-Catholic Slovak Church and the legal situation of the Church in Slovakia respectively. The history of the attempts of the Czechoslovak secret services to penetrate into the Vatican walls is interesting and also engrossing to read, and it is a pity that the author (Jozef Hal’ko – Saints Cyril and Methodius Theological Faculty at Comenius University, Bratislava) does not quote any source, which would be very useful for those who wish to take the topic further.

The lack of quoted sources is a shortcoming of the paper about the Greek-Catholic Church too. This church, once part of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, is one of the least known realities of the Christian East. Cyril Vasil’ SJ (Vice-Rector of the Pontifical Oriental Institute and Dean of the Faculty of Eastern Canon Law, Rome) describes the persecution perpetrated by Czechoslovak authorities and the resurfacing of Greek-Catholics with the events of the Prague Spring.

The Prague Spring is also cited by the former Slovak Prime Minister and former Minister of Justice Ján Čarnogurský in his reconstruction of the relations between the Vatican and Slovakia in the years of Communism. The Church, in that occasion, had the opportunity to emerge from the underground: an attempt shattered by the tanks of the Warsaw Pact in 1968.

Tibor Hajdu, Secretary of the Archbishop of Bratislava-Trnava, analyses this historical period from a legal point of view. In this well documented paper, Hajdu cites the changes in the status of the Catholic Church which occurred under the Tiso government, the Czechoslovak Communist regime and the Slovak Republic.

The fourth and last session was focused on the actual bilateral relations between Slovakia and the Holy See. After a brief introduction written by the former Apostolic Nuncio of Slovakia Msgr. Luigi Dossena, who departed this life in 2007, Msgr. José T. Martin de Agar (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome) and the then Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs Marek Šmid illustrate in their papers the current system of agreements between the Slovak State and the Church (not only the Catholic, but also the Evangelical Churches and the Jewish Community).

Church politics in the Slovak Republic is the topic of the last paper, written by Michaela Moravčíková, Director of the Institute for State-Church relations, Bratislava, who compares the different attitude towards religion among “the tolerant USA”, “neutral France” and Slovakia.

The book also reports the opening and closing remarks of the conference made by Slovak and Vatican authorities, such as the then Slovak Ambassador to the Holy See Dagmar Babčanová and the Prefect Emeritus of the congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples Cardinal Jozef Tomko.

La Slovacchia e la Santa Sede nel XX secolo makes a valuable contribution to the reconstruction of the presence of the Holy See in 20th century Central-Eastern Europe. It is not an organic reconstruction of the Vatican politics towards Slovakia/Czechoslovakia as this was not the aim of
the authors. On the contrary, the presence of so many different points of view offers the reader a wide range of approaches to the contemporary history of the Catholic Church in Slovakia. The disadvantage of this book is rather that the analysis of such broad topics is limited to the narrow spaces of conference papers.

On the whole, *La Slovacchia e la Santa Sede nel XX secolo* is a useful book, which provides a general but well-founded overview of the role played by the Catholic Church in Slovakia during the stormy events of the 20th century.