Slovakia:  
Yesterday and Today

by Dr. Josef Mikloško

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The Slovak Republic is one of the world’s youngest states. Seen through the prism of its complicated and painful history, in which Christianity has always played a dominant role, I would like to report on this small land in the middle of Europe, and also bring to the fore the most important facts of its history—from which it is evident that Slovakia has a history of which it need not feel ashamed. I would also like to give an eyewitness report on the most recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Slovakia.

The Slovak Republic has a population of 5.3 million: 85.6% Slovakian, 10.8% Hungarian, 1.6% Romanian, 1% Czech. The surface area covers 49,000 km². The land is mostly mountainous, and has many rivers, reservoirs, and mineral water springs. The highest mountain is Gerlach, in the High Tatra range (2,655 m). Eighty percent of the land lies above the height of 750 m. Approximately 40% of the surface area is covered with forest, 30.8% is cultivated as farmland, and 16.6% is pasture-land. Forty-four percent of the population was employed in industry and construction, 13.9% in agriculture—the exact figures cannot be ascertained today, owing to the high unemployment rate of more than 13%.

In March 1991, the population was 60.3% Roman Catholic, 6.2% Evangelical, and 3.4% Greek Catholic; 9.7% are atheists, and 18.2% are without religious designation. The Roman Catholic Church has 2,010 priests, 318 monks, and 2,866 nuns. Currently, 826 theologians study in Catholic seminaries, as well as 1,508 lay people, who also study theology. Approximately 3% of all schools are in the hands of the Catholic Church.

Slovakia is not rich in material terms. Its greatest wealth is in its people, their talent, productivity, and creative power. The first university in the land, the Istrôpôlitan Academy, was founded in A.D. 1465. At present, there are sixteen colleges in Slovakia. The most important scientific institution is the Slovakian Academy of Science.

The History of Slovakia

Celts settled the Slovak region as early as the Fourth century B.C. Around the year 1000, Germans came here. In the First century after Christ, the border of the Roman Empire was on the Danube River, and Romans were stationed there as well as to the east of the Danube in the Slovakian region. At the end of the Fourth century A.D., the population of that time would have suffered an invasion of Huns.

In the course of the Fifth century, the Slovakian Slavic peoples came into the region and, after a successful march against the Avars, united, and between 623 and 658, created a first state structure, the kingdom of Samo.

In the Eighth century, Christianity got a foothold here, thanks to the activity of missionaries coming from more westerly centers. At the beginning of the Ninth century, the Slavic prince Pribina, who in 828 consecrated the first Christian church in Middle Europe, reigned in Nitra. In 833, his successor founded the Great Moravian Empire, which, under Svatopluk I (870-894) had a scope of 300,000 km² and achieved great scientific and cultural advances, although threatened by the Franks.

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the independence of his empire, in 863 invited from Byzantium the missionaries SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius, with their disciples, into the Great Moravian Empire. They succeeded in establishing their own church province and, with Rome’s permission, introduced the old Slavic language as the official language of the church.

Since 885, when the activities of Cyril and Methodius came to an end, they have remained unforgotten throughout the whole history of Slovakia, and still form today the most important cultural and religious tradition, because the characteristic Slavic language, writing, liturgy (with a special chant which represents a mixture of Byzantine and Western elements), and legal system are still standing.

At the beginning of the Tenth century, the Great Moravian Empire and that of the Franks fell under the weight of the warlike Magyar tribes, owing to the disunity of the three sons of King Svätopluk. The Slovaks in the following centuries were increasingly part of Hungary.

In the Thirteenth century, half the residents of the country were lost through the invasion of Tatars. The Hussites occupied Slovakia from 1421 to 1434. Following the battle at Mohács in 1526, Slovakia was increasingly pressed by the Turk.

Slovakia was the heartland of old Hungary, and Bratislava was Hungary’s capital (until 1784), which the Hapsburgs incorporated in their empire. The Hungarian Parliament met in Bratislava and from 1563 to 1830, and eleven Hapsburg emperors and Hungarian kings and queens were crowned here.

In the Sixteenth century, the country was won over by the Reformation—at the beginning of the Seventeenth century, 70% of the population was Evangelical or Calvinist. This changed in the course of the Seventeenth century, with the Counter-Reformation, and Slovakia became majority Roman Catholic.

At the end of the Eighteenth century, in the period of the Enlightenment, the national awakening of Slovakia began. In 1787, Anton Bernolák codified the written language for the first time. More successful, however, was Ludovít Štúr, who took not the West-Slovakian, but rather the Middle-Slovakian dialect, as the foundation of the written language. Štúr was then also one of the leaders of the unsuccessful revolutionary movement of Slovaks in 1848. In 1861, the Slovaks presented a proposal for autonomy, but neither Vienna nor Hungary recognized it.

After the Austro-Hungarian settlement in 1867, an aggressive Magyarization was introduced in Hungary, which sought to dissolve the Slovakian people. In 1906-07, Slovakian elementary schools were banned.

Following the First World War, the Republic of Czecho-Slovakia came into being on October 28, 1918. The then-leader of Slovakia, Andrej Hlinka, said: “The thousand-year marriage with Hungary was unfortunate. We must depart from one another. . . . I’m for the Czecho-Slovakian orientation.”

The Czechs understood the new republic as centrist and unitary (rather than speaking of the Slovakian nation—next to the Czech—they spoke only of a Czecho-Slovakian nation), but the Slovaks wanted their autonomy from the beginning.

In 1938, the Western powers, through the Munich Treaty, sacrificed Czecho-Slovakia to Hitler. On October 6, 1938 the autonomy of Slovakia was proclaimed in Žilina; on March 14, 1939, under pressure from Hitler, Slovakia was proclaimed as an independent Slovakian Republic. On August 29, 1944, an anti-fascist revolt flamed up in Slovakia, the second-largest after Yugoslavia. The Germans occupied the nation and bloodily crushed the revolt.

Following the Second World War, Czecho-Slovakia was revived with the approval of the great powers. Unfortunately, however, the concerns and wishes of Slovaks were again undervalued. With the free election on May 26, 1946, the Communists were victorious in Czechia (38.1%); in Slovakia the citizens’ Democratic Party won (62%). In
the entire republic, however, the Communists received the majority—although they had 1,266,000 members in Czechia, and only 128,000 in Slovakia.

The Slovak Communists supported Prague centralism, and heightened the internal political crisis. In February the Communists led a putsch and began the introduction of a total dictatorship, with Stalinist repression, fictitious political processes, and the persecution of the Church. Thus began forty years of communist dictatorship.

In 1968, an attempt at reform was undertaken. The leader of the Prague Spring was the Slovakian communist Alexander Dubček. His unrealistic dream of socialism with a human face was butchered in blood after eight months on Aug. 21, 1968, by Soviet tanks. For the next twenty years, “normalization” was established under the leadership of another Slovakian communist, Gustáv Husák—this meant repression of human rights and freedoms. In October, the laws of the Czecho-Slovak Federation were adopted, but were again dissymmetrical, with the power center in Prague.

On December 30, 1977, the Holy See established its Slovakian church province, which is identical with the borders of today’s Slovakia.

Following the fall of the totalitarian regime in November 1989, the accumulated social problems again became real. The transformation of society began. Slovaks wanted a decentralization of power and authority; the Czechs did not understand this, and wanted to remain in a “functioning federation.” Discussions of the division of authority between the federation and the republic were held without success for two years.

Following the election in June 1992, the two victorious parties, in Czechia the Citizens Democratic Party of Václav Klaus, and in Slovakia the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia of Vladimir Meciar, on different bases, agreed to the dissolution of the common state. This was accepted by the two parliaments, and thus on January 1, 1993, two independent states were created by peaceful means—the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Thus, an old dream of Slovaks came to fulfillment at last, although under the leadership of ex-communists and atheists, in a difficult economic situation, and with a divided people.

Christianity in Slovakia

The population of today’s Slovakia had come into contact with Christianity by the Second century. Archaeological finds indicate the presence of Christians in Bratislava in the Fourth century. In the Ninth century, Prince Rastislav recognized the political influence gained through the activity of German missionaries, and, for this reason, in 861 he sent his emissaries to Rome to request the creation of Slovakia’s own church province. Pope Nicholas I did not fill this request, so Rastislav sent a new delegation to Constantinople. There, in 863, the Emperor Michael II sent the brothers Constantine-Cyril and Methodius to the Great Moravian Empire, where they instructed our forefathers in the Christian faith, produced for them the Glagolitic alphabet, and translated the Holy Scripture and other liturgical books into the language of the Slavic churches. Consequently, the Slavs received their own grammar, literature, translations, and liturgy in their mother tongue earlier than many civilized nations of Europe.

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Beginning in the Twentieth century, the leader of the Catholic Slovaks, a priest named Andrej Hlinka, worked together with the Evangelical priest and author Martin Rážus; they fought for the rights and autonomy of Slovakia. And so, the country maintained its national consciousness and faith into the Twentieth century, despite repression, emigration, want, and war.

Following the putsch in February 1948, the communists began a massive fight against the Church and all democratic powers. At that time, tens of thousands were illegally sentenced to a combined many hundreds of thousands of years in prison. All religious orders, Church schools, and religious publishers and hospitals, were outlawed, i.e., dissolved. During two nights in 1950, more
than nine hundred cloisters were liqui-
dated and approximately 15,000 mem-
bers of religious orders interned.

Following a short thaw in 1968, the
church was again for twenty years a
silent and suffering community, which
survived despite everything. It worked
above all in a well-organized under-
ground. Regular meetings of children,
youth, and families were secretly con-
ducted, “Samizdats” spread massively,
and religious books were smuggled in
from the West. Hundreds of thousands
of the faithful took part in Marian pil-
grimages. The tip of this iceberg took
shape in the 200,000-person protest in
Velehrad in 1985, the call for religious
freedom by Cardinal Tomášek in 1988
with 600,000 endorsements, and the bru-
tally repressed “Candle Demonstration”
on March 25, 1988 in Bratislava, with
which the “Soft Revolution” began.

Five Year After the Turning Point
The fall of the Iron Curtain was similar
to the fall of the Roman Empire. It was
demonstrated that a better world could
be built on the ruins of the communist
dictatorship, but it has proved to be an
ever more difficult task. The enthusiasm
over the end of communism awakened
illusions about a quick improvement in
the state of society and its future unity.
After forty years of slavery we are free,
but thraldom returned in another dress.
Instead of joy over new possibilities, we
are impatient, weary, and disappointed.
We tolerate the emergence of “Sovieti-
zation” of thought; pessimism, passivity,
envy, and rule from above. The orienta-
tion to short-term goals and easy solu-
tions brings no results. We were not pre-
pared for the assault of “consumerism,”
the rising criminality. Privatization without
morality, corruption, and vain attempts
at obtaining wealth without ethical
norms, are dangerous. The market can-
not solve all problems. In politics,
hatred, revenge, seeking out enemies,
and debt re-established themselves. Peo-
ple are again concerned about the possi-
bility of a return of totalitarianism.

In 1989, Europe had the singular chance to bring West and East closer. This
chance was allowed to pass; the
divide between the rich and poor has
come ever larger. Thus, it is certain
that Europe will either have a common future, or none at all. We should there-
fore follow the direction of the Papal social
encyclicals, more than the shock therapy of the I.M.F.

Pope John Paul II in Slovakia
Pope John Paul II, “1994 Man of the
Year,” is a charismatic personality. He
was a worker, sportsman, poet, drama-
tist, and is a philosopher, author, and
theologian. He is a man of faith and of
prayer, a messenger of peace and of love.
He conducts a dialogue with an individ-
ual just as he does with millions. His
pontificate is filled with his concern to
help people who are without hope.

The Pope has written twelve encycli-
cals, completed sixty-six apostolic trips to
many countries, and carried out many beatifications and canonizations. In his lat-
est encyclical, titled Evangelization of Life,
Without a moral renewal, nothing worthwhile will be created, and nothing will become better. The Papal visit signified that the Church is still ever-vigorous, that only the idea of Christianity can unify people, that the Cyril-Methodian tradition is something concrete, that the youth are discovering the value of Christianity, that one can solve the national tension in the Christian spirit, and that ecumenicism is indispensable.

The Pope opened his meetings everywhere with the words “Peace be with you,” and ended with the words, “until we see you again!” Only God knows whether this Pope—who spoke the entire time in Slovakian, and, what is more, who said, “I was born a Pole, but in my heart I am a Slovak”—will visit our country once more.

On June 30, 1995, the President of the Slovakian Republic, Michael Kováč, greeted the Pope with the words: “Today, in the hour of weariness and of resignation by many, I ask you to bring us courage, and to bring our faith out of the private sphere, out of the churches, and into the political, cultural and economic life.” To the priests, members of orders, and seminarians, the Pope said, in the Bratislava Cathedral: “During the communist dictatorship many of you proved yourselves heroic and true to Christ. With Him you have suffered, successfully resisting injustice and brutality. Your suffering has brought rich fruits of holiness and God’s mercy and will yet bring you more.”

The evening before, the Pope had met with youth in the time-honored Nitra, the cradle of Slovakian Christianity. The altar was adorned with an eight-meter-high crucifix, cut from a hundred-year-old linden tree. The Bishop of Nitra, Cardinal Ján Chrysostom Korec, who had secretly ordained priests and bishops, and, though not guilty, had spent ten years in prison for his faith, greeted the Pope. To work, he had written more than sixty religious books, which could only first appear after the political change-over.

The Holy Father told the 300,000 mostly youth, “Build the bridge between the second and third millennia, consecrate yourself entirely to the work of the new evangelization. Do not fear the radical demands of evangelizing. Know that the Holy Spirit is stronger in you than the spirit of the world. SS. Cyril and Methodius, at the risk of their own lives, refused to subordinate their faith to power. Don’t let yourselves be deceived by the ideology of false freedom.”

The Pope interspersed his sober speech, delivered in Slovakian, with Polish comments, which were understood by
all, as were his puns and humorous remarks. At the end, the young people sang and danced together with the Pope. The representatives of the youth received the encyclical *Evangelization of Life* as gifts. They dedicated anew to the Pope a spiritual bouquet of prayers, fasting, sacrifices, and communion. After his meeting with the youth, the Pope changed his program, to visit the castle in Nitra, where 1,167 years ago the first Christian house of worship in Central Europe was erected.

On July 1, the Holy Father visited Šaštín, the largest basilica of Slovakia, a baroque jewel from the year 1744. The Slovaks have often had to endure their own history of suffering and because of this, the Virgin Mary of Seven Sorrows is venerated as the patron of Slovakia. In Šaštín, the Holy Father said to 400,000 pilgrims: “It is good when one has somebody with whom to share his joy and his sorrow, when the mother is in your great Slovakian family, whom you can trust and to whom you can turn with all your sorrows and hopes.”

In the Salesian cloister in Šaštín, the Pope met with the Slovakian Bishops Conference: “The coming of the third millennium calls the whole church of the world, to give clearer testimony to love and unity.” In Bratislava, a meeting took place with the state President and the Prime Minister. In the evening, the Pope prayed the rosary in the Ursulinen church. At a nearby central square of the city, about 15,000 faithful prayed with candles together with the Pope.

The high point of the visit was the third day, during which, in Košice in the presence of 400,000 people, the three martyrs of Košice were canonized: the Croat Marek Križin, the Pole Milichar Grodziecki, and the Hungarian Stefan Pongrácz. They were active at the beginning of the Seventeenth century, in a time of class and religious warfare in East Slovakia, and bore witness to the strength of their faith on September 7, 1619 through their martyrdom. Among the attendees at the canonization were 11,500 citizens from the birthplace of the Croatian saint. The Holy Father delivered part of his speech in each of the three mother tongues of the new saints.

In the afternoon, in Prešov, the Pope visited the Church of St. John the Baptist, where the Greek Catholic Bishop Pavol Gojdíč is buried. He was illegally sentenced by the communists to a years-long prison term, and died in the prison at Leopoldov. At Akatist, the Holy Father gathered with 200,000 Greek Catholic faithful at the Greek Catholic feast of the Virgin. He emphasized their faithfulness and strength in faith—this church was banished in 1950 and the faithful forced to convert to Orthodoxy. Unexpectedly, he also stopped before the plaque commemorating twenty-four brutally executed Evangelicals from East Slovakia, who in 1687 had been condemned to death by a Hapsburg military court as a result of collaboration with insurgents of Prince Thököly. The Pope shook hands with the region’s Evangelical bishop, and prayed together with him.

On the last day of his Slovakian visit, the Pope went to Levoča, a tradition-rich place of pilgrimage in Slovakia. As early as 1247, a chapel with the statue of the Mother of God stood here on the Marienburg mountain. Now the Pope greeted 600,000 faithful, among whom were many Romanians, who proclaimed: “Holy Father, you have kept your word and have come to Levoča.”

The Pope celebrated Mass with six cardinals, forty bishops, and a thousand priests. Eight hundred singers from nine church choirs sang. At the end, when in the silence only the nightingale trilled, the Papal hymn “In Rome on Seven Hills Was Built” rang out. The Pope then said: “That faith was able to survive in this land, we thank the witness of these houses of God. . . . Divine Providence gave you the gift of freedom. That is the opportunity and summons to build a new Civilization of Love. Here may you be ever united and free; you were bound together by faith, hope, and love, which were the guarantee of your freedom.”

In Levoča, many people sat by me who a short while before had been against religion in this region, and had fought against the faith of young people. Now in the police cordons I saw them, crossing themselves during the Papal blessing. Thus, much had changed in five years in Slovakia.

Following the departure of the pilgrims, the Pope visited, in the center of the High Tatra, the Slezsky cathedral, to rest briefly. In the evening, he departed from the representatives of Slovakia at the Poprad Airport. At that time he once again clearly condemned the communist dictatorship, and emphasized the courage of those who fought them: “May God protect Slovakia and its inhabitants. . . . I will keep a deep memory of these blessed days. Until we meet again.”

**Quo Vadis, Slovakia?**

The 1994 election brought to power in Slovakia a coalition of left-oriented populists and nationalists, led by Vladimír Mečiar. These politicians, who had already been twice before recalled, bussed themselves with concentrating all power in their hands, in order to halt the transformation process of society, and to silence the opposition. The regime promised (but did not fulfill the promises), sought alleged enemies, and made massive purges in their own interest. It had promised to share the costs of the Papal trip as a state visit, but did not keep that promise—perhaps because the bishops’ conference had taken the side of President Kovač, Mečiar wished to take back the promise at all costs.

Despite the current situation, the author of this piece is an optimist. Without a moral renewal, nothing worthwhile will be created, and nothing will become better. Christians, who are the majority of the Slovakian population, are indispensable in this process. The Papal visit called out the Christians to become agitators, to find unity, to overturn barriers, to solve conflicts. His visit signified that the Church is still ever-vigorous, that only the idea of Christianity can unify people, that the Cyril-Methodian tradition is something concrete, that the youth are discovering the value of Christianity, that one can solve the national tension in the Christian spirit, and that ecumenism is indispensable. Slovakia has many courageous people of good will, who, united, will stop evil and will prevent a return of totalitarianism.

Slovakiens are indebted, above all, to Christianity, for having enabled them to survive the problems and difficulties of the centuries. For this reason, there is for them only the way which John Paul II formulated on October 22, 1978 with his beginning: “Have no fear to receive Christ, open your doors to Him, have no fear!”