

Memorial Mass for Msgr. Jozef Tiso in Cleveland

By Joseph J. Stipkala

On Saturday, December 1, 2007, a memorial Mass was offered for Msgr. Dr. Jozef Tiso (1887-1947), President of the Slovak Republic, 1939-1945, at the chapel of St. Andrew Svorad Abbey, Cleveland, Ohio. Abbot Clement Zeleznik, OSB, was the main celebrant.

This special liturgy served as the occasion for turning over some relics of the late clergyman-leader to the Slovak Institute on behalf of the Slovak community. The occasion also marked the 60th anniversary of the martyrdom of Msgr. Tiso, who was hanged in Bratislava at dawn on April 18, 1947 by the postwar Czechoslovak communist collaborators of Eduard Benes, a man who had been restored to the presidency of a country he had deserted before the beginning of World War II. The execution of Dr. Tiso resulted from spurious charges of treason, that is, refusing the Stalin proposal to declare the Slovak Republic a satellite of the Soviet Union.

Assisting Abbot Zeleznik at the Mass were four Slovak American monks from the abbey, Father Albert Marflak, OSB, Father Joachim Pastirik, OSB, Brother Gabriel Balazovic, OSB, and Father Michael Brunovsky, OSB. The latter played the organ and with vocal assistance of Martin Trojan, a young seminarian from Slovakia currently residing at the abbey- led the congregation in singing. Approximately 60 people attended the Mass, several of whom traveled from Detroit, Chicago, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Also among the faithful was Andrew M. Rajec, National President of the First Catholic Slovak Union.

Dr. Pavlo Presents Tiso's Relics

During the liturgy, Andrew F. Hudak, Jr., Director of the Slovak Institute, introduced Ludovit Pavlo, M.D. of Derby Connecticut, President Emeritus of the Slovak League of America, who then formally presented the relics of the late Slovak leader to Abbot Zeleznik. These relics comprised material from Msgr. Tiso's clothing and some soil- both recovered from his grave- contained in a brown, copper urn about ten inches high and six inches in diameter.

Abbot Zeleznik delivered an eloquent, stirring and passionate homily about Dr. Tiso's great service to the Slovak nation and his ultimate martyrdom. At the outset, the abbot (who at the time of Msgr. Tiso's execution was a freshman at Benedictine High School) said that in all his Google research on the Slovak leader's life, all he could find was slander, false charges, misrepresentation, and defamatory biographical data. He then posed this rhetorical question: "Where on the internet is there anything truthful about Dr. Tiso?"

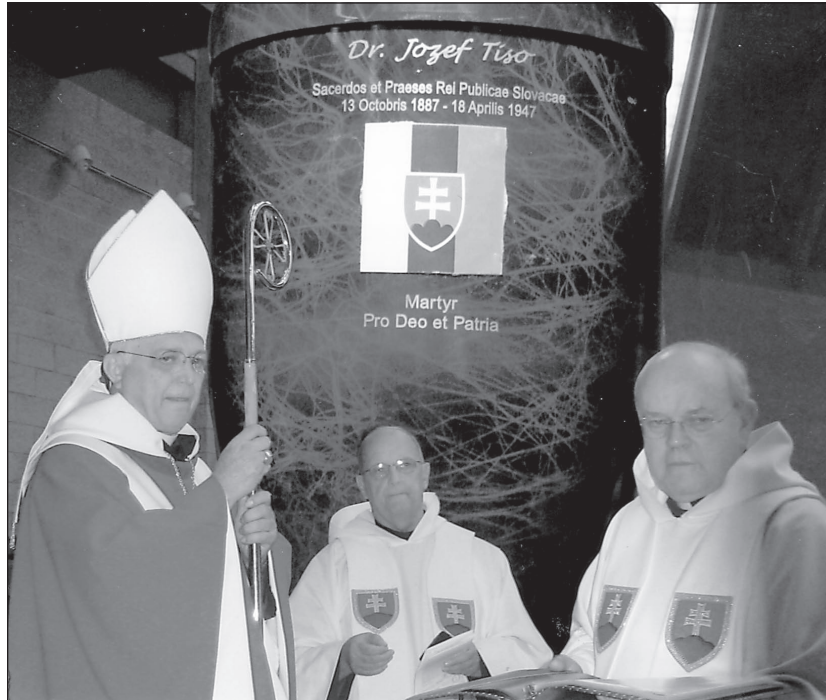
Sitting in the congregation, I, too, had to wonder what happened to all the reams of pro-Tiso articles by some of the great Slovak writers of the past, such as Dr. Joseph A. Mikus, my uncle, who served as a diplomat in the Slovak government during the time in question; Father Andrew Pier, OSB, former Director of the Slovak Institute; and Dr. Frantisek Hrusovsky, historian, among others, whose material about the late Slovak leader somehow did not find its way into Google and probably not into other internet outlets.

"Za Boha a za narod"

The central theme of Abbot Zeleznik's homily was taken from Msgr. Tiso's last message to the Slovak people on the morning of his execution: "Za Boha a za narod" (For God and Nation). He said that for the late Slovak leader, this phrase was not just some kind of a simple, empty statement of policy as a politician, nor something to stir up the crowds for fervor, but a real principle of life. "It had depth, breath, vision, power, and inspiration for him and its proof is in his very life." He said that the phrase, "Za Boha a za narod," was not only the unequivocal intent of Slovak history, but also the explicit command of God. He further paraphrased Msgr. Tiso's last words to the effect that he knew he was a martyr in the defense of Christianity against Bolshevism, an evil against which the Slovak nation would always have to defend itself, not only in the spirit of Christian character but also in the interest of its future.



The Holy Mass for the repose of Msgr. Dr. Jozef Tiso was offered by Abbot Clement Zeleznik, OSB and concelebrated by Rev. Albert Marflak, OSB, President of Benedictine High School and Rev. Joachim Pastirik, OSB.



The presentation of Msgr. Tiso's relics to Abbot Clement Zeleznik, OSB, Rev. Joachim Pastirik, OSB, and Rev. Albert Marflak, OSB.

were thrown into jail, hanged, or died for being opposed to him- quite different from what was happening in countries around him, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and especially Russia.

"Za Narod: He was also a true patriot, a man who loved his country. So when he was in a position to help his people, he did it with political power. He accepted the presidency, knowing it would be a dangerous job, and he could be canceled out at any time. And so he accepted this to make it possible for his people to have their right- their natural right- to freedom and self-determination, and he knew it would not be easy... He reached out to the poor and even to his enemies. He made sure about just wages for the family man, which means he was following the teachings of the Church in social justice. He was a socialist from the Christian point of view, not from the German point of view. German socialism was nationalistic, and you know who benefited from this system. This was not true in Slovakia, for during his reign, Slovakia blossomed. They had inner peace in the community and growth in the economy.

Abbot's Appreciation for Tiso Relics

"The Church has always said to respect and to take care of the dead, because in those ashes, we

have the seed of the Resurrection. And in the history of the Church, we know that it has always honored the saints and kept relics so that its members could pray to those saints in a very concrete, rational way. So we expect Tiso to bless our abbey. It is a little selfish, but it is OK. And you are welcome to come and visit the Slovak Institute and pray before those ashes.

"The saddest feeling I have is when I went on the internet and saw all these slanders, maligning Tiso at every angle. Which means the prejudices that were instigated by the communists and by some Czechs who hated him, especially Benes, are still part of the mind consciousness of a lot of people. That should be corrected or at least attacked and give people an alternative view, and there are plenty of things that show that the evidence is different."

The abbot went on to say that Msgr. Tiso led his nation under the most difficult circumstances, and he strongly emphasized the fact that he never had anyone condemned to death, never committed a crime, was not anti-Semitic- as widely believed, even today- and, in fact, saved the lives of about 28,000 Slovak Jews. The proof: A delegation from Slovakia put up a statue in Israel to honor Dr. Tiso, and the Jewish community accepted it. Yet, in spite of all that, his reward was an ignominious hanging.

Abbot Zeleznik concluded with this: "So I thank Andrew F. Hudak for making it possible for us to receive Tiso's ashes, and I want to thank him for getting me all riled up about Tiso. And I want to offer you a deeper appreciation of Msgr. Tiso, because without doubt, he pleased the Lord and gives us a principle to live by that deepens us in the truth of our being. Every time we draw closer to God, God sends us to our neighbor. So everyone of us should be keeping this principle: Za Boha a za narod."

The full text of Father Zeleznik's remarks follow this article.

At the conclusion of Abbot Zeleznik's homily, the congregation immediately burst into a spontaneous and enthusiastic round of applause- highly unusual in such a staid church setting- showing their appreciation for his very well-prepared, in-depth portrait of the late Slovak president and for his wide range of knowledge of the country's history over six decades ago.

Video on Tiso's Exhumation

Immediately after the Mass, a large movie screen was set up in front of the altar, and young Slovak seminarian Martin Trojan showed the group a video tape of the March 2007 exhumation of Msgr. Tiso's body in his grave in the Martin Cemetery in Bratislava in which were found his human remains and priestly paraphernalia. Some of these relics, as mentioned above, were later turned over to Dr. Ludovit Pavlo (on behalf of the Slovak community in the U.S.) on his visit to Bratislava in May 2007. The video tape also included a Mass celebrated for Tiso by Bishop Villam Judak of the Nitra Diocese in Slovakia.

Following the video showing, the congregation-many of whom were at the abbey for the first time- marched to the Slovak Institute on the lower floor of the building to gaze at the walls, adorned with pictures and photos of prominent Slovaks throughout history, and to look at some of the thousands of books, maps, pamphlets, magazines, documents, and memorabilia contained therein. They also socialized, renewed acquaintances, and partook of coffee and Slovak kolachy.

Two Washingtonians Come Only for the Mass.

It was of course disappointing to see such a small turnout, especially from the Cleveland area, for such a major event. I was gratified, however, by the presence of two longtime friends from my days with the Slovak-American Society of Washington, D.C., Stephen Matula of Falls Church, Virginia, who is president of Jednota Branch 856 in Washington, D.C., and Joseph Gazdik of Arlington, Virginia, formerly of Piestany, Slovakia. As the event was coming to an end, I suggested we go somewhere for lunch, but Matula said, "Sorry, Joe, we have to hurry to catch our plane back to Washington." He indicated that they had traveled to Cleveland just to attend the Mass and to see the Slovak Institute. We need more Slovaks like Steve and Joe.

My Own Observations on Dr. Tiso

As of 1939, Slovakia, a small country, had suffered 800 years of Magyar oppression

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Homily of Abbot Clement Zeleznik, OSB on the Occasion of Receiving Msgr. Tiso's Ashes

Za Boha a Narod, Za Boha a Narod. For God and Nation. For Monsignor Tiso this phrase was not a simple empty statement of policy as a politician, nor something to stir up the crowds for fervor, but a real principle of life. It had depth, breath, vision, power and inspiration for him and its proof is in his very life. So we thank Dr. Ludovit Pavlo for choosing the nice section of the witness of Tiso in his court trial, which he states and offers to the Slovak people that they would never forget this phrase, Za Boha a Narod.

Za Boha. For Tiso God was not on the back burner. God was at the center of his life. And the proof is his secretary, Charles Murin in his book; REMEBRANCES AND TESTIMONY tells us that Tiso always prayed the Divine Office and he prayed it with attention and no rush. And he always said Mass with fervor and he mediated. Now it is very interesting that some psychologists say we must be transcendent to be human and one of the characteristics that they put forward is that you have to pray and your prayer has to be...fruitful. They are a rare group. The fruitfulness of Za Boha can be seen in a number of ways. First he was self-possessed. He accepted himself and was a peaceful person when he dialogued with people with those he disagreed. And even when he was angered about something it was anger about injustice and not vindictive toward the person. The proof is that in his whole reign of five years none of his opponents were thrown in jail, hung or died for being opposed to him. Quite different from what was happening in the countries around him, Germany, Italy, and a few other places as Hungary and especially Russia.

Second proof: Because he prayed and was related to God, Tiso had a foundation that was pretty solid. In 1943 while with some friends, Charles Murin and his wife and a few others were talking about the future. What are you going to do when you are seventy? He stopped them and said, "I will live until tomorrow." It is not written anywhere that I shall reach sixty, (at that time he was 50 years old), seventy, etc. This means he personally had the realization from the time he took office that his life had the possibility of being cancelled out at any time. And he knew it. He had already reflected on what this meant in terms of his life. So he put God first.

Now when you do that, what happens? You begin to discover that God is indeed in your life and He helps you and you begin to see Him at work and become more convinced Za Boha. And that's the way Tiso lived.

It's amazing when I was preparing for this talk I punched in Tiso's name on the internet and Google came up with tons of hits. I could not possibly go to all of them. But the ones I did skipping to 10, 25, etc., everyone maligned Tiso. They called him a fascist, a killer of Slovaks, anti-Semitic and so on, having no foundation whatsoever. Se we Slovaks should be writing so that they are wiped out by presenting another view.

Za Narod. Tiso loved his country. He was truly a full human being who understood that to be born into a certain country is a gift. And to love your nation is a sign that you are open to the giftedness of your nation. So he was a true patriot, a real patriotic person who loved his country. Now you and I have plenty reasons to love our country. But do we love it? He loved it. And that meant not simply the place but the people and its history. Why? Because our life is a mystery. Why were you not born in China? If you were, you know where you would be right now. It's a gift. We need each other and our history is part of the giftedness of God towards us. But then it has to have flesh on it and it did for him. So when he was in the position to help his people he did it with his political power. First of all he accepted being president, because he knew at that time that this was a dangerous job. He already knew that. He said to his secretary that he was a martyr for the justice that was due to the Slovak people. Meaning the people were suppressed and did not have their independence. And so he was going to make the step, to make it possible for the Slovak people to have their right natural right of freedom and self-determination, at the cost of himself. He knew it wasn't going to be easy because there was ideological thinking even in the Slovak community who were pro-Czech and some pro-German and they were vocal. But his attitude was that it takes time for people to really appreciate the fact that they have an independent country and so his job was not to squash his enemies but to teach them. That they have a great gift in their country and so he was patient with them.

So when he saw the opportunity, and he saw there were homeless people he made sure, made it possible so that condominiums and houses were built...this is a fact. I want to emphasize that these are facts because on Google none of this is mentioned. It is pure slander. He actually did it and it can be verified in documents. He made sure that the wages were for the family man. Which means he was following the teaching of the Church on social justice. He was a Socialist from the Christian point of view not from the German point of view. German socialism was nationalistic and you know who benefited from this system. This was not true in Slovakia for during his reign Slovakia blossomed. They had inner peace in the community and growth in the economy.

Za Narod. When he discovered that the Jews were being deported from Bratislava, which he did not know, he offered to resign but three Rabbis came to him begging him not to do



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and two decades of Czech hegemony- reasons why my own parents left their native land for a better life in the U.S. World War II was already in its early stages, and Msgr. Tiso had been placed between a rock and hard place vis-à-vis Slovakia's future. Reasonable people have to agree that- with Hitler on the periphery throughout- no one could have handled the situation better than the priest-leader in securing at least a taste of independence, about six years worth. For that, Dr. Tiso is deserving of the highest honors in the pantheon of Slovak heroes.

so. They knew him and realized that if he was replaced by anyone they would be wiped out. And sure enough, what did he do? He stopped all deportation. So he saved 28,000 Jewish Slovaks. Google again and again slandered Tiso as a anti-Semitic. Another proof is a delegation from Slovakia put up a statue in honor of Tiso in Israel and the Jewish community accepted it. I'm sure they checked their facts. Whether he was anti-Semitic or not and they knew he wasn't.

Za Narod. He reached out to the poor and his enemies. So that at the time of his reign the country was very peaceful.

So Za Boha a Narod is a vision. A vision with light and strength that guides us into the fullness of life. Since he knew his life was always fragile in terms of whether he would live or not or be shot. He also began to realize the implication of his life and so he was always ready for death. But he was ready for death not in kind of empty way. He was a good theologian who had deep insights. And one of the proofs is in that long nine hour witness in his defense in the Bratislava court he said: "At this point I give my soul to God, my heart to my nation, my people and my body to my executioners... And I am not guilty." Which confirms another statement he made before: "That if I had to do this all over again I would have done it exactly what I did." Which means he lived from his center, from his conscience before God and he had nothing to fear proved that he went to his death with dignity, peace and confidence. He prayed all night the day before he was hung. He said Mass in the morning and with peace he went to the gallows.

Do we really believe in the Resurrection of Jesus and its power like he did? Because all of us are going to die, and if we really thought about our death like him then we have nothing to fear, especially if we realize it is the Resurrected Jesus we receive in the Eucharist. And He leaves the trace of the resurrection not only in our soul and mind but in our very body and that's why we receive the ashes of Tiso with gratitude. So that's why we have holy ashes right here. We are touched by Divinity when we receive the Eucharist and the traces of God's presence which is holiness left in our body. The Church has always said bury the dead, respect the dead, take care of the dead because in those ashes we have the seed of the resurrection. And in the history of the Church, we always know that the Church honored the saints and kept relics so that they could pray to those saints in a very concrete relational way. So we expect Tiso to bless our abbey. It is a little selfish but is OK. And you are welcome to come and visit the Slovak Institute and pray before those ashes.

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