

Archbishop
ANTON VOVK

The Servant of God



+ Anton Vovk



Dr Anton Vovk at his installation as Archbishop in the cathedral of Ljubljana on March 4th, 1962.



Dear readers,

In the times of trial, God's Providence blessed Slovene Christians with a good shepherd and courageous witness to faith, Archbishop Anton Vovk. With pleasure I welcome the publishing of this booklet in English. May the example of the Servant of God, Anton Vovk, strengthen you in unshakeable trust in the Lord and in generous service to God and man!

Ljubljana, April 23, 2008

Msgr. Alojz Uran
Archbishop and Metropolitan of Ljubljana

Blaž Otrin – Anton Štrukelj

ARCHBISHOP ANTON VOVK THE SERVANT OF GOD

The Life of Archbishop Msgr. Dr. Anton Vovk

Anton Vovk was born on May 19, 1900 in Vrba (Gorenjska), in the same room where his famous great uncle France Prešeren (1800), the most famous of all Slovenian poets, was born. He attended school at Breznica and in Kranj, where completed the first six years in grammar school. His parents died early – his father before Anton was four years old, and his mother when he was seventeen. In the autumn of 1917, he entered the minor seminary of Škofovi zavodi in Šentvid near Ljubljana, completed his secondary school exams there in 1919, and then he entered the seminary in Ljubljana. He was ordained a priest for the diocese on June 29, 1923.

Anton Vovk spent his first three years of priesthood as an assistant pastor in Metlika. Then in 1926 he was appointed associate pastor at Tržič before becoming the pastor there in 1928. He inherited a large parish financial debt, but he succeeded in paying it off in relatively short time. However the pressures caused some health problems for him that would remain with him throughout his life. As pastor of the parish he was able to respond well to the pasto-



Newly ordained priest Anton Vovk in his home parish Breznica in 1923.

ral, cultural, spiritual and social needs of his people. He renovated the parish church, other parish buildings and published a monthly »Church Herald«, which was recognized throughout the whole diocese. Because of the way he was able to manage the parish of Tržič, he was appointed diocesan spiritual councillor on June 6, 1936.

One year before the outbreak of the Second World War, on April 15, 1940, Anton Vovk was appointed cathedral dean in Ljubljana. It was rumoured that he would eventually become rector of the new Baraga seminary. The outbreak of the war, however, changed these plans and Vovk became president of the diocesan committee helping refugee priests. A large number of priests were forced into the Ljubljana province, or simply fled there, from territories which had been occupied by the Germans (Štajerska and Gorenjska). The committee tried to provide shelter for these priests and to take care of their other needs, which became a difficult task because of war-time conditions. On July 26, 1944, Vovk was also appointed rector of the seminary.

At the beginning of the war, Bishop Gregorij Rožman appointed a group of vicars general to be charged with managing the diocese in case that anything should happen to him as bishop. Vovk was the last name on this list of new vicars general. But as it turned out, at the end of the war and the arrest of vicar general Ignacij Nadrah, Anton Vovk was given the responsibility of leading the Ljubljana diocese. On June 15, 1945, a time that was particularly difficult for the church in Slovenia, Anton Vovk became vicar general of the diocese or »the poor general« as he called himself. A year later, the nuncio to Yugoslavia, Archbishop Joseph Patrick Hurley, asked Father Vovk on behalf of the Holy Father



Anton Vovk as a confirmee with his godfather Anton Zupan in 1907.

if he was willing to become auxiliary bishop. This is what Vovk wrote about the request: »I could not believe it. I had been asked to do something which (God is my witness) I had never before considered in my life and for which I had never prepared myself ... I asked for half an hour to think it over ... when I emerged from the room, overwhelmed, I headed off to the cathedral and to the altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Help from Brezje to make my decision there ... I had never knelt before the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help with a greater matter in my heart. How good it had been, when

so many times as a schoolboy I made the pilgrimage on foot all the way from Vrba to Brezje. In the summer I went almost every Sunday, strengthening my vocation there in the presence of Our Lady ... together with Mary, I prayed that God's will and the will of the Church might be fulfilled.« For his bishop's motto, Vovk chose the words »In Domino Confido - I trust in the Lord,« and it is this very trust that helped him to guide the diocese of Ljubljana wisely through times of great tribulation. Due to the new territorial divisions between geographical areas, Vovk became responsible also for the apostolic administration of the Slovenian parts of the dioceses of Rijeka (from 1951 to 1961) and Trieste-Koper (from 1951 to 1955).



Parish priest Anton Vovk seeing his family at his home in Vrba in 1935.



Bishop Vovk was a renowned preacher. He gave the suffering comfort and strength. With his soft baritone he mastered any space without any loudspeakers.

As Bishop of Ljubljana Anton Vovk faced serious opposition by the government

When the communist authorities learned about the appointment of Anton Vovk as auxiliary bishop, they immediately made it clear to him that they would not recognize him either as a bishop or as vicar general, and that he should prepare himself to face considerable opposition. This was the only promise that the communists faithfully fulfilled all the years that he was bishop. Vovk found himself, first as vicar general, then as auxiliary bishop, and as apostolic minister, then as bishop and finally as Archbishop of Ljubljana in difficult times that were unprecedented in the history of the archdiocese. The new »people's government« had, through revolution, created a new social order over which it had complete control. The communist's regime repudiated all political structures that existed prior to 1941. The Catholic Church was the only institution which managed to maintain a degree of autonomy in the new order, so it stood as the sole alternative to the communist party structure. Communist leaders were aware of the Church's moral authority and would do anything it took to try to break it apart.

At the end of the war, nearly 300 priests and consecrated men had departed Slovenia – 185 of them from the Diocese of Ljubljana alone. Some were executed without trial. The government jailed priests on a regular basis, many with lengthy prison

sentences. In May 1945, there were 50 priests in prison. Between the end of the war and 1961, 429 priests had been charged in court – 339 of them received prison sentences, many of them with repeated sentences. Nine priests were condemned to death; four of these sentences were eventually carried out.

The political persecution of the Church

The communist government continued to find new ways of undermining the Church in Slovenia. It planned a long process of »de-christianising« the Slovenian people, or as Matija Maček said: »The ideological battle against religious prejudices will be long and hard and will be particularly difficult here because the Slovenians are the most religious nation, so it will take us generations to accomplish this.« The agrarian reform and the process of nationalization deprived the Church of all its material resources. Most of her social, cultural and educational activities were discontinued since the state monopolized all these fields. Religious gatherings were banned, printed materials were confiscated, and religious processions obstructed. Only the most basic religious practice was tolerated, accompanied by strict control and constant obstruction by government officials. Only one seminary for training priests was allowed to remain open, only one brief newsletter, the *Oznanilo*, was permitted, and everything was done to interrupt any kind of religious education. After the war,



Bishop Anton Vovk and his secretaries: Franci Vrhunc, Stanislav Lenič (latter auxiliary bishop), Božidar Slapšak, Ivan Merlak. All secretaries experienced imprisonment.

the communist authorities allowed some religious education in schools where they had control, but in 1952 they banished all religious instruction in all the schools of Slovenia. One of the aftermaths of communist regime is that religious education continues to be excluded from Slovenian schools to this very day.

Immediately after the war, the so-called »consent« regulation was invented by the government. It was a measure by which every priest who had not served in his parish during the war could be either permitted to return to the parish or be prohibited from doing so. Later this rule was extended to cover the annual transferrals of priests and even the assignment of newly ordained priests. This law which was used by the government to control the appointment of priests was enforced until 1952. Even though there was no written law on the books, this policy was simply used by authorities to control priests in Slovenia.

The impoverishment of the Church in Slovenia was made even worse by additional government restrictions. In 1946, the so-called government of the People's Republic of Slovenia prohibited priests from collecting money in churches – in some rural parishes this was the only source of income for the Church. Every year, the voluntary donations by people to the Church became more problematic. Between 1949 and 1953 everyone who donated to the Church had to obtain special permission from lo-



Bishop Vovk and bishop Maksimilijan Držečnik of Maribor with the administration of the seminary of Ljubljana and newly ordained priests in 1951. The newly ordained priests were kept in the seminary throughout the summer and interrogated by the so-called Administration of State Security (UDV).



cal authorities, and then they could only give their donations to priests who were members of the Association of Catholic Priests of Sts Cyril and Methodius which had been set up by the communist government. Any special collections, for example for the seminary, were completely forbidden. And then the government allowed the taxing of income from religious ceremonies on an arbitrary basis by local authorities, even baptisms in church for which no stipend had ever been required. Individual priests were required to pay sales tax on everything that was purchased. Before 1955, the taxes imposed on the Diocese of Ljubljana were so great that the bishop was not able to pay them. Consequently in 1955, the state confiscated Goričane manor house and 10 hectares of land, under the pretext of agrarian reform.

The abuse and attacks on Archbishop Vovk

Archbishop Vovk, as leader of the Church in Slovenia, was subject to constant harassment and brutality by the communist leaders. There was a variety of constant pressures on him, with the leading role being played by the Communist party's secret revolutionary police – the so-called *State Security (UDV)*. Their tactics included constant interrogation of the Archbishop, their presence at all confirmation ceremonies and parish visitations, constant analysing his sermons, and interrogating and abusing priests and lay people who were supportive of the Archbishop. They wrote reports on his activities each day, recording with whom he had spoken and what his opinions were on different matters. They conducted regular searches of the Archbishop's office, looking through all his incoming and outgoing mail. And finally, they made several attempts on his life, culminating with the awful assault on January 20, 1952 when he was attacked by a mob and set on fire at Novo mesto.

During his time as leader of the Ljubljana Diocese, Archbishop Vovk was interrogated by the UDV at least 90 times. He accepted these interrogations patiently, recognized them as a necessary evil imposed by the communist government. But at the same time he retained his personal dignity and maintained his principles and values despite extreme pressure at times for him to renounce them. In the course of these interrogations, he was brutally bullied, humiliated, and insulted. The interrogati-

ons were carried out by committed Communists such as Mitja Ribičič and Zdenko Roter. Vovk was interrogated throughout his tenure as bishop, at various locations, at all times of the night and day, even when he was sick in bed.

The contents of these interrogations of the Archbishop have been published. The details of the examination reveals that the most common subject until 1952, when relations between Yugoslavia and the Holy See were severed, was either about the Papal Nuncio or the Vatican. The Archbishop was constantly questioned about his relationship with the Nuncio, his whereabouts, what they had discussed together, and what instructions he has been given, what information that he had shared with the Nuncio and what kind of secret network the Church had setup in Slovenia. The UDV tried to force the Archbishop to allow the Church in Slovenia to become independent of the Vatican, but they soon realized they were not going to convince him to do such a thing. Consequently, they urged him to be as patriotic as he could be to the Yugoslav state. When they failed to make him a puppet for the government, they began to try to convince him that his attitude of non-compliance would incur the disapproval of the Vatican, which he was told was uneasy with bishops who had strained relationships with civil authorities. Since he refused to cooperate with the UDV and communist leaders, they considered Vovk to be working »against the people« which would cause harm, of course, to the faith of the people. Because of his »obstinacy«, and his failure to comply with their wishes, the UDV accused the Archbishop of supporting a US-Vatican policy against Communism, of being a lackey of Dr Anton Korošec and Marko Natlačen, and therefore a reactionary leader against the state which made him a non-patriotic Slovenian. At times the pressure on the Archbishop became extremely intense. During an interrogation on August 4, 1949, they tried to persuade him to steal the Nuncio's briefcase or to cooperate with them in doing so, or at least to allow somebody from the UDV to be secretly present at a meeting between the Archbishop and the Nuncio. In October 1952, the Archbishop was interrogated while seriously ill in bed and they tried to gain information from him in this condition. The issue about the relationship between the Archbishop and the Holy See quieted in 1952, but resurfaced in 1958 when Archbishop Vovk travelled to Rome to see the pope.

The interrogations of the Archbishop often included malicious forms of extortion with which they tried to force on him, offering him various privileges, and above all else promising to release imprisoned priests. Because the Archbishop remained steadfast in his loyalty to Christ and to the Church, they continued to punish him and put further pressure on him by imprisoning priests that were close to him, as well as seminarians. For example, on December 23, 1948 when he did not consent to their demands, the UDV interrogators replied: »As a consequence you will find out tomorrow the priests who are put into prison because you would not fulfil our demands.« That same night they arrested and imprisoned for six-and-a half years the Archbishop's secretary Božidar Slapšak, who had just recently been released from prison, and they imprisoned for one year Franc Kimovec who was dean of cathedral. The Archbishop simply replied to his interrogators: »I do not know why you do not put me in prison if I am really to blame for all these priests being in jail. Here I am, take me.« To this, UDV officials gave him a cynical response: »We know that you would like to be put into prison. That would please the Nuncio and the Vatican, who would write all about it and explain the reason another bishop had been locked up in Slovenia. We do not wish to give the Nuncio and the Vatican this pleasure. Just be aware of the consequences of your own deeds.«



Confirmation at Grahovo in 1948. The authorities hindered transport in a car. Bishop Vovk was driven smiling by a horse-drawn carriage.

Psychological pressure on the Archbishop and attempts on his life

In addition to the psychological pressures on the Archbishop, he was also the target of assassination attempts and physical attacks. At the confirmation ceremony in Kočevje in May 1947, the authorities stopped all public transport so that people from the surrounding villages would not be able to attend the ceremony. They also cut off water and electricity, prohibited the sale of food and drinks, and slashed all four tires on the car which the bishop was using for travel. Because of the rheumatism with which the Archbishop suffered since taking over the leadership of the diocese, in August 1947 he went to the spa Dolenjske Toplice for treatment. The UDV organised protests in front of the parish house where the Archbishop was staying. The demonstrators, who were either hired or forced to participate, smashed the windows of the parish house and broke into the rectory in order to attack the Archbishop. However, his firm and self-confident manner bewildered them to such an extent that they simply turned around and left the rectory. At the confirmation in Škofja Loka in May 1951, the UDV gave someone a bottle and instructed them to pour it into the soup which the Archbishop was going to eat. The order was not carried out but it was later discovered that the bottle had contained a mixture of castor oil and old oil. In June 1951, a hired mob smashed the ground floor of the parish house at Bled where the Archbishop was spending the night. At the time of confirmations and visitations, parish priests were always interrogated and often locked up, their people were intimidated in various ways, and the ceremonies were always obstructed in some way by communist officials. For example, the tall »Maypoles« set up for ceremonies were cut down, protests were organized, churches were sometimes smeared with feces and hateful graffiti, and disruptions were organised on the day of the ceremony.



The bishop's ring lost during the barbarous raging of the mob in Novo mesto. A railwayman found it accidentally and returned it to the bishop through the provost of Novo mesto.

Novo mesto January 20 1952 Archbishop Vovk is attacked and set on fire

The culmination of attacks on Archbishop Vovk took place in Novo mesto, January 20, 1952, when he was attacked and set on fire by a mob. He had taken the train from Ljubljana to Novo mesto with several people in his company where he was to bless the renovated organ in the parish of Stopiče. While they were passing through a tunnel in route to Novo mesto somebody poured a foul-smelling fatty liquid over him while they were passing through a tunnel. When the train arrived to Novo mesto, the Archbishop alighted together with his escort. There was a crowd of protesters



Bishop Vovk after being set ablaze in Novo mesto on January 20th, 1952.

gathered at the station and they began to insult the Archbishop and physically attack him. The wild mob forced him back into the railroad car and surrounded him. Accompanied by cries of »Let's kill the devil!« somebody poured petrol on him and set him on fire. The Archbishop's coat began to burn with a strong blue flame that seriously burned his face. The crowd shouted: »Burn, devil, burn! Let the devil die!« while the Archbishop struggled to douse the flames. He threw off his burning coat and extinguished the burning celluloid collar which had caused him serious burns. He was left with an ugly scar on his neck that remained for the rest of his life. It was a visible sign of his martyrdom. A policeman then stepped into the car and told the Archbishop to go to the station waiting-room, promising to protect him from the mob. But his suffering continued when the crowd forced the exhausted Archbishop to stand on a table while they mocked him. An hour-and-a-half after the train had arrived at the station, the UDV arrived and told the Archbishop to get back on the train, promising to protect him from the crowd. The demonstrators then blocked the arrival of the doctor, and then tried to block the automobile with which the Archbishop was to be taken to the local hospital. He received only basic care there so that he could return to Ljubljana by train to receive proper medical care. The Archbishop had spent a total of four-and-a-half hours in Novo mesto and in all this time, neither the police nor the representatives of the UDV did anything to control the enraged mob. And the persecution did not end there. When the Archbishop was being treated in hospital for his burns, which were so severe that he was at times in a semi-conscious state, the UDV used this opportunity to interrogate him twice on his sickbed.

The authorities tried to portray the incident to the public as an unpleasant event perpetrated by a multitude of patriots, for whom the Archbishop represented all the evil which they had suffered at the



Ordination of priests in Ljubljana on June 29th, 1950.

hands of the occupying armies and local traitors. However, the course of events that day at Novo mesto, and the preserved archive documents of the Communist party, indicate very that the incident was carefully organized by the party in cooperation with the UDV. Those that had directly participated in the attack on the Archbishop were never punished. In fact later documents indicated that they were rewarded by the authorities for their action against the Archbishop.

The Archbishop's love for his priests

Anton Vovk showed great concern and love for his priests. He was always anxious to welcome them, to talk with them, to visit them, and encourage them. Many times he interceded with the authorities, the UDV, and the religious commission for priests, even though most of the time it was in vain. In his spiritual testament, he wrote: »I am sorry that I cannot ordain these new priests today. I pray that they will be good. Keep them, Lord, and bless all our priests! I love them very much because they belong to the Lord and work and suffer for him. I am very sorry if ever I was a little hard on any of them. Truly, it was only a consequence of all the hardship and my exhausted nerves. I was always happy to forgive straight away, to forget everything, and I ask the same



Bishop Vovk with his fellow priests at confirmation at Gozd in 1950.



of all my dear fellow priests.« Archbishop Vovk also showed great concern for members of religious orders since many of them were expelled from Slovenia and were also persecuted. His care and concern for religious was manifested by his action on the last day of his life, when he sent a get-well note and some peaches to a religious sister who was ill in the hospital.

A major source of suffering for Vovk was the Association of Catholic Priests of Sts Cyril and Methodius (CMD) which was founded and run by the authorities with the aim of setting up divisions in the Church at all levels - between the priests and prelates, between the ordinary and the »patriotic« clergy, between other bishops in Yugoslavia and those of Slovenia. It was divide and conquer by the government. It was Archbishop Vovk who was able to foil the government plan thanks to his wise leadership. He refused to accept the existence of such an association, which was setup to be independent of Church leadership by the Communist authorities. However, he imposed no sanctions against the Slovenian priests who joined the association because he knew the pressure they were experiencing, the worst in all of Yugoslavia. The Archbishop suffered pressure and criticism from both the state authorities as well as from certain church circles. At UDV interrogations, he was repeatedly the target of coercive attempts to make him convince priests that they should join the Communist »liberation front« and later the CMD; that he should recognize their rules, and that the CMD should become the official association of priests for Slovenia. His refusal to fulfill their demands meant that priests who were close to him were imprisoned for years on end. On the other hand, he was reproached by some Slovenian émigré priests and called the »red bishop«, because of his frequent contact (forced) with Communist authorities. He also experienced some conflict with a few Croatian bishops, who did not understand his situation. At the bishops' conferences for Yugoslavia he had to defend himself frequently against certain Croatian bishops, who did not understand his refusal to cooperate with government officials. The matter was referred at one time to the Vatican.



Pope John XXIII received Bishop Anton Vovk in audience in Vatican on February 1st, 1960.

Pope John XXIII and Archbishop Anton Vovk

Following the death of Bishop Gregorij Rožman, Anton Vovk was named the presiding bishop in Ljubljana on November 26 1959. Two months later, he finally received from government authorities all the necessary papers allowing him to travel to Rome for the first time since the conclusion of the Second World War, to visit the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul (the ad Limina visit), and to meet with the Holy Father, Pope John XXIII, on February 1, 1960. Bishop Vovk apologized to the Pope, saying that his illness prevented him from genuflecting before him, but the Pope replied: »I should kneel before you.« Bishop Vovk left a deep impression on many people he met every time he visited Rome. Many recognized him as a martyr. Pope John XXIII made the Diocese of Ljubljana an Archdiocese on its 500th anniversary, December 22, 1961, and Bishop Anton Vovk became Archbishop.

Trust in the Lord was his strength

Despite all his troubles, Vovk remained remarkably happy as an Archbishop. He was very popular with his people, who responded well to his charismatic nature and his robust physical appearance. They saw in him a true spiritual shepherd and a defender of the fa-

ith. His sermons filled people with enthusiasm, and with his deep voice he had no trouble in commanding any venue. He liked to attend popular ceremonies, where he gained new strength and encouragement despite his serious illness. In 1957 he wrote: »I have never fallen unconscious and in summer I can survive two confirmation ceremonies in one day. I must say that I am a unique kind of healthy sick person who is not thwarted in his work by illness and even looks well. For as long as God wishes it to be so!«

The Archbishop was concerned about the condition of churches throughout the archdiocese. He worked to improve the aesthetic appearance of churches despite the weak financial condition of parishes; he kept drawing attention of the people to the need for repair and renovation of churches. He was surely a product of Gorenjska, firm, proud, unwavering, and direct, but also easy-going and humorous at times. There are many anecdotes about his humor, and he was able to remain cheerful even when his adversaries caused him heartaches. For example, when the authorities forbade him to travel to a confirmation by car, he travelled in a horse-drawn carriage with a broad smile on his face. He was full of inner peace! Even though mentally and spiritually the Archbishop was able to take the many pressures, his health gradually weakened. Soon after he took charge of the diocese he began to suffer from rheumatism and diabetes, which became particularly severe after he was set on fire in Novo mesto. When, in 1948, he was diagnosed with diabetes he said: »There's not really going to be time for illness! But I accept this cross too.« His blood-sugar level was so high – between 320 and 345 milligrams (the normal level is around 120), which should have caused him to be frequently unconscious. He died following a time of serious illness on July 7, 1963 and was buried, according to his own wish, in the priests' section at the Žale cemetery in Ljubljana. Vovk suffered almost constantly from the very first day he became responsible for the Diocese of Ljubljana. Until the end of his life, he was a faithful witness to Christ's Gospel, in the spirit of his bishop's motto – »In God I trust.« He was a martyr in the true sense of the word, even before he was set on fire in Novo mesto on January 20, 1952.

The diocesan procedure for his beatification was completed in Ljubljana on October 12, 2007. All the documentation was handed over to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome on October 26, 2007.



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PRAYER

for the Beatification of Archbishop Anton Vovk

*O God, in Archbishop Anton Vovk
you gave your people a good shepherd
and courageous witness
to the faith in times of trial.*

*Glorify him before the universal
Church that his example may shine
for all to see and that*

*through him our
faith in your fatherly
Providence and trust
in Mary's motherly
protection may grow.*

*Through Christ our
Lord. Amen.*

Please send details of any
miracles which occur through the
intercession of the Servant of
God Anton Vovk to the
address: Nadškofija,
Ciril Metodov trg 4, p. p. 1990,
SLO-1001 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

