

The future of Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe

Július Filo

(Guest lecture presented at The Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, USA
February 20, 2007)

Let me first of all express my gratitude for this opportunity to speak to you. In the beginning of my lecture I would like to extend to you cordial greetings of your sister institution, The Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. Since 1991 there is an Agreement on cooperation, which is the formal link between us.

The topic, I am going to speak about to you, has been proposed by your Dean Dr. Paul Rajashekar. There are a few good reasons for such a topic at this faculty and in your country, which I would like to list shortly before I start to deal with it.

We belong to one body of Christ and specifically to its Evangelical – Lutheran part. This gospel about our organic unity has strong and permanent consequences for all of us. Let me mention two of them

- “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Cor 12,26). The communion in one body means, we should know about the richness of our sufferings and joys. They are our common heritage and blessing. We have something, which belongs also to you. We participate in the life of one body. We are suffering together and rejoicing together. Let us live out more completely and more sensitively our belonging to one body.
- The other reason is, that we need each other in Christ. This world is speaking about different coalitions, for peace, against a joint threat. We as members of one body of Christ, because so has decided Christ our Lord, need each other. We belong to one living instrument of God’s mission in this world. The eye cannot say to the hand “I have no need of you (1Cor 12,21). We need each other, because God needs us in his mission in this world together.

We cannot speak about the future without an attempt to understand the way through which God has led His people. In accordance with the hermeneutical principle of the “History of salvation” we have to look at the life of the Church in a particular setting, since it is part of the history of salvation, which is presented in the Bible. The history and the present situation of God’s people are very important for the understanding of the future. Since “history is such activity which is bound in a tension between the promises and the fulfillment in such a way that the promise receives its irreversible direction at the future fulfillment” (so in my translation the key sentence of W. Pannenberg, *Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte*, 1959). In this way our attempt to understand the future of Christianity in Eastern and Central Europe will rely on God’s promises and God’s activity leading to the completion (telos) and not purely on our human estimations and guesses.

1. Decisive historical elements continuing to play an active role in the present time.

1.1. The region concerned is a **meeting place of the western and eastern European traditions**. One prominent historical event represents this truth. It was the arrival of Cyril and Methodius, the apostles of Slaves in 863 upon an invitation of the ruler Rastislav to the Great Moravian empire. The first Church on the territory of present-day Slovakia was consecrated already in 828 in Nitra and Bratislava. (Kvačala Ján, *Dejiny reformácie na Slovensku, Liptovský Mikuláš* 1953, s 21) In the regions of today’s Moravia and Slovakia the pope allowed a new liturgical language as one of the first ones after the dominant Latin and Greek. “Cyrilica” was developed and used to translate biblical books

and express Christian liturgy. Up to now this language is in use by the orthodox Christians. Geographically next to it, the western tradition, related to the strong German tribes and nations, has been longing for dominion over our region.

This closeness of the two great spiritual traditions in my opinion led to their tense but still creative togetherness. This is still today expressed e.g. in a high appreciation of family values, sincerity and emotionality of the culture of human relations, interest in the mystical dimension of faith and in liturgical expressions, which support an experience of holiness in the liturgy. This brings e.g. a great deal of singing in the liturgy also in our evangelical Church. (Gospel and Epistle readings as well as collects have to be sung by our pastors.)

1.2. Echoes of the past struggles for religious freedom can be still sensed.

The reformation reached our region in the 16. Ctr. The Catholic Church tried to resist it by all means. Already the Nation council (parliament) in Budín on the 24 April 1523 declared in the law 54: the Lutherans in Hungary to be public enemies and they were supposed to be robbed of their lives and property. Slovakia belonged to the Austrian monarchy. Hungary with a certain type of political autonomy was the eastern part of the monarchy. For a similar decree Nr 4 of the year 1525 passed at the Council in Rákoš ordering, that “Lutherani omnes comburantur” (all Lutherans should be burned) the Hungarian king received from the pope Clement VII 60 000 golden coins and a letter of appreciation. In the most cruel period of counterreformation in the years 1671 – 1681 the Lutherans have lost over 800 churches, the complete public religious life was stopped almost for 10 years. The priests and teachers have been sentenced to loss of freedom, property, many were expelled from the country, sold as galley slaves, some killed. (see more Kvačala, p 224ff).

On the background of this persecution the Protestants have been struggling for the political rights for individuals and for the Churches. Several military uprisings were motivated also by the lack of freedom of religion. It is remarkable that that all the signed peace treaties (e.g. Vienna 1608, Linz 1647 peace treaties) negotiated after a successful uprising against the Habsburg (catholic) military and state power, have resulted in guarantees of religious freedom for all people. These have ignored the existing sociopolitical culture and have given the freedom to choose religion also to peasants (who belonged to the aristocracy and before had to follow the faith of their landlords) and also soldiers. In these struggles for equal rights for all, not only for the Protestants, the democratic nature of Protestantism has been expressed.

Memories of those past struggles echo even in our times in hesitation, mistrust and fear whenever in the families or in present ecumenical movement new decisions are to be taken. The monuments of these struggles are omnipresent in our region (e.g. church buildings taken over by the Catholic Church...).

1.3. Experiences with the suffering under totalitarian powers are those, which the people of our region and especially the Churches and their members can share with the global community. This suffering as reflected theologically under the cross of Christ represents a peculiar treasure of our Churches. We had to suffer under two major totalitarian movements in the 20th Cnt and to learn to forgive and to reconcile.

- **National-socialism from Germany and its military and political occupation of our countries brought for several reasons a situation of “status confessionis” to Christians.** For Protestants it was beyond understanding to see that facism started in a country from which we have with gratitude received the Reformation. Slovakia has become, for the first time in history, an independent state because of “Hitler’s push to the East”. It was however politically dependent on Germany. The Catholic Church played a key role in its government. This led to a new antagonism between Catholics and Protestants. It has led also to a division inside of Christian communities in which some have chosen an open or hidden opposition against the state policy. The deportation of Jews from Slovakia and other countries dominated by Germany remains

to be understood not only as a sin of the initiators, but also as a co-responsibility of those who have assisted or were not active enough to protect the Jews. (There have been acts of opposition. The Lutheran Synod has publicly opposed these policies, our bishops have been arrested as a result of it, many Jews were rescued by private initiatives and evangelical youth has in large numbers participated in the Slovak national uprising against German occupation beginning in August 1944).

- **The rule of the communist party and 41 years long process of construction of the “Real Socialism” has effected all the Churches.** The Churches as publicly existing institutions represented the only power, which didn't support the official ideology of Marxism Leninism. They were subjected to controls by all existing mechanisms. Pastors could be called to their positions only after the “State secretaries for Church questions” approved their studies and employment. We see today however, that it was important, that the Church existed publicly also under this cross of this control and persecution. The Gospel was publicly spread mainly in the Church buildings and Christian homes. Children could be educated in religion in the communist schools only if the parents had dared to apply for their religious education each year. No organized youth work besides congregations and no organized school and diaconal work could be done by the Churches. The many institutions (schools and homes), which we had until 1948 were socialized. The Churches could only with great difficulties run their publishing house and theological seminary. Pastors especially in the 50's were persecuted, some were even imprisoned, many were often transferred to other parishes as a punishment. (After the year 1989, our Church has rehabilitated about 90 pastors who suffered open persecution.) Under the situation of persecution pastors did, however, meet at theological conferences convened by their bishops and all of them wanted to attend. Unity among us was visible and stronger, more forgiving and caring than sometimes today in the days of freedom. It was a miracle that churches were in most of the regions well attended (A surprising fact for the visitors from the free world). The Gospel was accessible publicly and the faith has been permanently tested.

We are thankful to God for the surprising gift of freedom, which we enjoy today. But looking back at the years before 1989 I also have to say that it was for the Church of Jesus Christ very important to exist during these years publicly. This meant of course also to suffer and endure and resist all forms of open and hidden controls and persecution for the sake of Christ and His Church. An illegal Church would not have been able to do so much for the Kingdom of God in Eastern Europe. Therefore it was worthwhile to expose ourselves publicly to controls and suffering for Christ together.

This history and the fruits of suffering however are today not known to and understood by many. Especially this is not known to the younger among us today and to many Churches abroad. Therefore we have to share it together. (A few publications give witness about these times. e.g. Rt. Rev. Uhorskaj Pavel, Ako to bolo. “How it was”, Bratislava 1992. See more to this concern also in Filo,J: Prenikanie soli, “Penetration of the salt” Matica Slovenská, Martin 2006 p. 80-117)

1.4. Ambiguity of the continuing state support to the Churches has also long historical roots. Slovakia is one of the member states of the European Union today. It keeps (likewise the Czech Republic, Greece, Belgium and part of France) a system of State economic support to the Churches. Most of the 16 registered Churches in Slovakia receive it. The salaries of the pastors and contributions to all the legally prescribed insurances are fully granted by the state budget. The State also contributes strongly to the yearly budget of the Churches' headquarters (bishop's offices). This culture was started

in a humble way already in the year 1848. The ambiguity of this system can be seen in the following:

- In the time of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia, it was interlinked with the state control of the Churches.
- In the present time Churches have got used to it to such an extent, and the total amount of the means given to the Churches has grown so much that a transition to a self-supportive program of the Churches would be very difficult. It would require a long period of transition from one system to another and a lot of preparation. Most of the mainline Churches do see the present system as viable and as theologically justifiable.
- The support received from the state budget doesn't lead automatically to a strong stewardship program of the congregations. One could also say that it leads to a lack of awareness to develop a program of stewardship in the congregations or it slows down the processes leading to it.
- The ecumenical attempts to look for new forms resulted in the conclusion, that also a possible new program would require a close cooperation with the government.

1.5. In this hopeful period of our national history, the **historical rewards of the respective Churches in the nation building play an important role**. The Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Slovakia, the second largest Church of the country, but still a minority Church, has given our country the majority of the writers and leaders in politics and science. This was clearly the case in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Ctr. in the time of national awakening and establishing of the Czechoslovak republic in 1918. This became our pride and a challenge for the future.

1.6. Finally I would like to mention the fact, that **our Churches have a very long and profound history of faith and worship life although the majority of members are not aware of it**. In the case of our Evangelical Lutheran Church one could say, that most of the people understand and defend as their Lutheran tradition the one, which they remember and experienced personally. The age of the blossoming of our Church, however, was before 1670. At that time a weekly communion was practiced. Worship with two highlights, Word and Sacrament, was normal. The feasts of apostles and evangelists, the biblically based St. Mary feasts as well as free personal confession, were practiced. This, however, after many difficult periods in history (foremost the last one, the limitations of the church life und communist rule), fell out of reach of the memory of the Church.

The liturgical renewal today can build on the forgotten highlights of the Lutheran tradition, and the worldwide Lutheran communion. It has to overcome the limitations of what I call "squeezed (shortened) memory of the good Lutheran tradition" in our region.

2. The Church in civic society

Let me now spell out some of the basic changes, which have occurred after the fall of the totalitarian communist regime. I would like again to put them into a tension between the promise given and the progress reached so far.

2.1. Church's influence on the life of our society has been growing and after the liberation Churches have been invited to participate in the life of the society. Let me mention a few signs pertaining more specifically to the Slovak realities.

The census in 1991 revealed after more than 40 years what we could call a sociological assessment of the Churches' influence in Slovakia. 75% belonging to the Churches, 10% atheists and 15% not wishing to reveal any Church affiliation. Ten years later in a new census in 2001 there are almost 85% of people belonging to one of the Churches and religious societies (to the last ones belong as religious communities Jews and Jehova's

witnesses). Out of the total 5,3 mil 3.7 mil belong to the Roman Catholic Church, 373 000 to the Evangelical Lutheran, 219 000 to the Greek Catholic 109 000 Reformed, 50 000 Orthodox, 20 000 Jehova's witnesses and 9 further protestant denominations, less then 10 000 each. (See more Format 15/2003, ISSN 1336-1325 p 14ff) Still this result is after many years of suppression of Churches a great positive surprise. The tendency of this statistical Church affiliation was growing. The same wasn't the case in other neighboring countries.

The Churches have received in our country the possibility to create spiritual programs in the public radio and television. This is being done in a spirit of ecumenism. Pastoral care in hospitals, the army, prisons... became a new chance for the mission of the Churches. The Churches have tried to regain their position in public schools. Today at all state schools up to grade 12, religion of a respective registered Church can be chosen as a "duty selective" subject. If a pupil/student does not want to choose any religious education, the alternative, which has to be attended, is ethics.

The state and the Churches cooperate in many ways. For this purpose besides laws on Churches also new State - Church treaties on cooperation have been signed. The Catholic Church started this process of the preparation of the treaties. As a subject of the international law, they have taken care of themselves. Our Church being the second largest did not follow their example. Faithful to our commitment to justice and equal rights from the past centuries, we have invited all the rest of the registered Churches and religious societies to join with us in a preparation of a treaty with the Slovak republic. The result was that in 2001 eleven Churches and one religious community (Jews) in a festive celebration signed the same text of the treaty, which guarantees the same conditions for our public activities and our cooperation with the states. The signatories on the side of the Slovak republic were: the President of the Slovak republic, the Chairperson of the parliament and the Prime minister. Subsequent new treaties (indicated in the basic treaty) on "The Church schools and education..." and "The pastoral work in the armed forces..." followed in the following years. The Ecumenical Council of Churches assisted the whole process.

2.2. Democratization of the society and the good news on our equality in Christ calls for new patterns for communication and structures of the Churches. The years after 1989 have been very fruitful as far as the deepening of internal democracy of the Churches concerns. It has to be seen not only as reaction to the political movements leading to democracy in the society. The regained freedom allowed us to work on a higher quality of our relations and decisions. In our Church many new legal orders have introduced new possibilities. The collection of more than 200 pages exists in printed and in electronic way on internet. The new constitution was successfully introduced and the work of the synod has been changed to a more participatory way.

2.3. Renewal of the Churches mission in a pluralistic society became the main task. Programs of spiritual renewal have been started and new a new phase added to them. In the year of the great jubilee of Christianity, a two-year program of Bible studies and education of the elders has been organized and realized in the congregations.

Since the Churches had lost their means of missionary outreach and service in the society it was important to introduce them again. Two options of how to proceed have been struggling with one another in the times in which the new vision has been discussed. Should it be the reconstruction of the old structures and means of the ministry, which the church has used before the year 1948? Or should we assess the present needs and possibilities and develop the new ones?

Our Church had a school in almost every village next to its church building. We have therefore started to establish new schools. They should not Christianize the existing public schools. (This is what happened in most cases of the Catholic schools) Our Lutheran schools should bring new dimensions to the existing school system. Therefore our Church opened up

16 new schools. Most of them were secondary schools with linguistic education established in cooperation with partners abroad. Our Church used as its obvious advantage its international partnerships in mission. Bilingual secondary schools were possible mainly because of the American Lutherans. This brought a fruitful field of cooperation. The schools (kindergartens, elementary and secondary) represent a strong instrument of Mission of our Church offering the quality linguistic education and spirituality open to the worldwide Christianity.

In the same way the new institutions of diakonia, homes for elderly, and for orphans were established in cooperation with our partner churches in Germany (Württemberg, Thuringia). A Youth organization as a civic society with a legal relationship to our Church has been established. Several mass media organizations preparing materials for education and congregational life and mission in public and private mass-medias were also created. A Bible school in Martin educates lay coworkers for the congregations. Centers for seminars and recreation were opened.

2.4. For the successful mission of our Churches it is important that the Christian Churches declare publicly their unity in Christ. People of our region who are looking for their spiritual orientation need to see, that the Christian Churches are united in Jesus Christ. Otherwise their decision for Christ and courage to join one of the Churches would be blocked by the lack of basic unity between the Christians.

This is being realized through the Ecumenical Council of Churches and several other ecumenical networks. Yearly representative ecumenical worship services televised in the week of prayers for Christian unity with participation of the highest state representatives became a regular tradition. They set an example of unity for the society in the beginning of the each year. Lutherans have signed with Catholics an agreement on the reciprocal acceptance of Holy baptism. This came in Slovakia as a positive echo to the Joint declaration on justification.

I would like to mention one particular ecumenical event, because I believe, it is significant for the ecumenical and social climate in Slovakia. I would call it the largest ecumenical happening in recent history with an influence on the society. It was the celebration of our inclusion in the European Union. As April 30 was declared by the Slovak republic to be a day of state celebrations, our Lutheran Church (through the Ecumenical Council of Churches) invited all the other Churches to celebrate it together in an ecumenical worship service. It became the first item on the program of state activities. It was decided that this day be started at 9am with worship. The invitation was formally expressed by three parties: The Chairperson of the Slovak Parliament, the Chairperson of the Catholic Bishops Conference, bishop Prof Tondra, and the Chairperson of the Ecumenical Council of Churches (myself). The worship was directly televised and broadcast on Slovak radio. It took place in our Lutheran Church in Bratislava with 2500 seats and the Church was full on the morning of a regular working day.

Never before did so many politicians along with the highest representatives of the Churches, regular members of the Churches, public and youth celebrate God in one Church. The worship had the theme: Let us share our faith in the European Union. The Roman Catholic weekly reported on its first page under the headline: "Through the doors of the Church into the European Union." (Katolícke noviny May 2004, p 1) Unfortunately, Slovakia was probably at this historic day the only country among the new EU member states, in which such an ecumenical Worship service took place.

God's blessing for the times of freedom is essential. It is thus important to make everybody aware of it and invite all sectors of the society to pray for it together. This was our vision and intention, which have been also carried through. The Church has not been assigned by Christ Jesus to hide behind the walls of church buildings. As responsible to Christ the

Savior and living from His rescuing mercy, the Church can play publicly its missionary and reconciling role in the society.

On the basis of the above trends and challenges with their theological implications let us know try to understand the future in which we are interrelated in one body of Christ.

3. The Future growing out from the living roots of the Church. What are the major future challenges of Christianity in (Central – Eastern) Europe (and North America)?

3.1. Search for a new spirituality

Spirituality faithful to Christ and appealing to the people of today and tomorrow

The culture of today is characterized by almost an endless multitude of choices even in the area of belief. At the same time strong skepticism about the uniqueness of any of the offers and frequent relativism of spiritual and ethical values is continuing. How to present Christ to these demanding, oversaturated and indecisive persons of today? How to do it to people who are, even if they are not aware of it, deeply loved by God through Jesus Christ?

It is my conviction that the Church oriented to the future and carried by the Great Commission of Jesus Christ needs to live in a process of permanent renewal of its spirituality. For Christianity at large and Lutheranism specifically, it means to recognize the renewing instruments of God and apply them in the context of one's own missionary vision and confessional identity.

Many issues need to be studied and applied more carefully. What were the genuine renewal movements in the history of our national churches and global Lutheran communion? What is the specific quality of charismatic renewal in Lutheranism? How do Charismatic and Eucharistic renewals in the framework of our confessional tradition bring about the Transformation for mission in the future?

How does God transform us and bring about personal growth of unselfish faith interested in the salvation of others? In which way should we go in order to experience a transformation of the congregations into a missionary community? How should renewal and transformation be carried out in respect to the unity of the Church? (Some of these questions have been lifted up by the recent studies of the LWF: Report of the LWF Ad hoc Committee on Mission and Evangelism in Europe and North America; Geneva 1998, Mission in Context, Geneva 2004.)

3.2. Permanent improvement of the Church's Mission

The basic goal of the mission of the Church is to recognize the goals of the Mission of Triune God and to participate in it. The Church is invited to do so in proclamation of the Word (evangelism) and in ministering to the suffering people of God (diaconia) regardless of their confessional, social... attitudes. The call for holistic Mission means a permanent need to adjust the present forms of mission and the structures of the missionary Church. Let us deal now with the one, which is, I believe in the holistic character of mission is missing most.

Diakonia as the sign of permanent, concrete and responsible Love of God through the church to people in need, represents the quality proof of the mission of the church. For our region of Central and Eastern Europe (and probably not only for us) it means the following:

- To overcome a misunderstanding (which is widespread also in the state-church situation in Scandinavia and elsewhere) that diakonia is a task of the state and the role of the church is only to accompany it in a pastoral way.
- To develop instruments of congregational and institutional diakonia which will allow the Church to confess Christ in caring love to people in their physical, social and spiritual needs.
- To show that to follow Christ means to give preference to the love of suffering people before our own institutional security and interests. The missionary success of the early

Church was exactly based on such a sacrificial character of love motivated by Christ and accompanied by the verbal witness to Christ.

Let me mention an example for this. Tertulian of Carthage reported about a typical pagan observation towards Christians in his apology in the beginning of the 3Cnt. Pagans have seen how Christians love each other, and not only that. They were able to give comparably much more than what those, who were not Christians, were giving to the official cult. But it was even more challenging, that the collections made by the Christian congregations were used first of all to care for the poor, the orphans, the old, the prisoners and the needy who lived in their surroundings... (see more in Thraede Klaus: Soziales Verhalten und Wohlfahrtspflege in der Griechisch roemischen Antike in: Diakonie – Biblische Grundlagen s. 46)

3.3. “You are the light of the world” says Jesus. We are encouraged to look for higher standard of unity among ourselves leading to effective ministry to the world.

It is our chance and our task to allow light, which we are in Christ, to shine in our Churches and through our Churches to the world. The concern for justice and the deepening of love inside of the Church communion takes place in the framework of the inherited Church structures. Practically we are torn between the interest to allow the congregations to be Churches as much as possible and to encourage the sharing of gifts in the national and global Church. We are concerned to support the weak parts of the Church and would like to see as much as possible free donations coming from those, who have received more from the Lord.

We try to resolve our personal matters and disciplinary challenges with love and patience and look for ways, which are not going to harm congregations who have experienced the generosity of love through Christ and are not able to take such decisions.

It is our continuing effort to be good stewards of all talents and goods. On a national level it means that we have to look for a new model of financing of the churches, which is going to be more compatible with the dynamics of faith and the life in the civic society.

Ecumenism has become the precondition of successful mission. But how should ecumenism look? How should we as Christian Churches help each other to support our growth in faithfulness to Christ? How much and in what way should we be critical of one another and still safeguard the public quality of love between us?

And how do we enter the inter-religious dialogue as a responsibility of the people of God? In Central and Eastern Europe this is really a new agenda item for the Churches.

To face the future responsibly means also to prepare for it. Our faculties have agreed in 1991 on a relationship of cooperation. Developing a theological education for the mission of the Church of tomorrow is a joint challenge. Let us develop some of the above issues into a field of future cooperation between our faculties. In such a way we might manifest the organic unity of the body of Christ, which exists already now in Christ Jesus.

Prof. ThDr. Július Filo, Dr.h.c.

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Prof. ThDr. Július Filo, Dr.h.c.

Evanjelická bohoslovecká fakulta Univerzity Komenského
Bartókova 8
811 02 Bratislava

Recenzovali (peer reviewed by): Doc.ThDr. Ján Grešo; Prof Paul Hinlicky PhD, Roanoke
College USA