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Ján Havlík

A life on a mission “on the path of love”



On 31 August 2024 in Šaštín, Slovakia, the beatification of the servant of God Ján Havlík, seminarian of the Congregation of the Mission, recognized as a martyr of the faith.

Ján Havlík - Janko, as his friends called him - was the man of loyalty and perseverance, until the end. First of all, fidelity to Christ and yes to the priestly and Vincentian vocation; fidelity in trusting abandonment to the will of God; unwavering fidelity to the Church and to the Holy Father; fidelity in the proclamation of the Gospel, in the apostolate and in charity; Fidelity in work; Fidelity in accepting and accepting suffering; Fidelity to your companions in justice and truth; Fidelity in forgiveness.

Janko was born on 12 February 1928 in the village of Vlčkovany (now Dubovce), the eldest son of four children. The family lives in extreme poverty, and from an early age has to make sacrifices to attend school. In 1943, at the age of fifteen, he matured his vocation: he wanted to be a priest and missionary Lazarist, to proclaim God's love for the poor. He moved to Banská Bystrica, in the heart of Slovakia, to attend the Apostolic School (the equivalent of a minor seminary) of the Congregation of the Mission of Saint Vincent de' Paul. In 1948, the communist coup complicates the situation not only for Janko's educational path but also for the Catholic Church in Slovakia, which the new regime considers an enemy of the people.

In 1949, the communist regime intensifies its efforts to dismantle the Christian churches in Czechoslovakia, focusing on the Catholic Church, considered reactionary and enslaved by capitalist powers because of its loyalty to the Vatican. In 1950, after the failure of the attempt to create a State Church, the regime plans to eliminate male and female religious orders from the country. The Vincentians are shot in the night between 3 and 4 May 1950: the novice Ján Havlík, along with his companions, experiences deportation, communist reeducation, and forced labor.

Three months later, thinking that the "reeducation" has borne fruit, the regime sends everyone home. But Janko is and remains steadfast in fidelity to Christ and the Church. Despite the danger, he and some of his confreres attended a clandestine seminary, firmly in their desire to become priests. The courses are held in the evening, to maintain an appearance of normality working during the day. However, on 28 October 1951, the secret police raided and arrested all those present who remained prisoners for fifteen months, characterized by violence and torture, before the trial which took place between 3 and 5 February 1953. The charge is "high treason aimed at overthrowing our system of popular democracy".

The sentence is very severe: Ján Havlík is sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment, later reduced to ten. He is labelled MUKL (muž určený k likvidácii, man destined for elimination). Firm in his surrender to God's will, he tells his mother: 'We wanted to offer God the holiest sacrifice and now we offer him our lives on the paten of love'.

Janko is sent to the labour camps, forced to mine uranium without protection. Despite all the anguish, even in the darkest moments, he is faithful to the mission, tirelessly dedicating himself to helping his comrades, on a material and spiritual level. His characteristic trait is his smile, which does not leave his face even during his imprisonment. 'With his smile he exuded peace and hope,' testifies a fellow prisoner.

Faithful to the Lord's call, even in prison he professes Christian values and does not hide his vocation. This conviction makes him a target. He is beaten, locked up, isolated for months, forced to do the hardest work (which - as the jailers themselves point out - he always performs with precision and to the best of his ability, even when he is now without physical strength), brutally interrogated at all hours of the day and night. His friends, seeing him suffer, advise him to be less rigid in his missionary commitment, but for him there are no compromises when it comes to being faithful to his commitment to proclaim God's love and help his brothers and sisters.

Because of this perseverance, he is further accused of crimes against the State and in 1959 he is sentenced to another year in prison: his missionary activity is considered incompatible with the 'religious freedom' proclaimed by the Czechoslovak constitution.

The last period of imprisonment is the most difficult. Especially in 1958, as he recalls in his memoirs, torture, both physical and psychological, tested his unshakable faith. Janko goes through an experience of profound spiritual bewilderment from which he manages to emerge in total fidelity to God's will, committing himself to live 'every movement, act, sigh or breath as a prayer'.

He entered prison at the age of 23, and was released on 23 October 1962 when he was 34. His state of health is compromised and debilitated by eleven years of physical and mental suffering, but in the Release Notice, the authorities point out that 'the sentence cannot be said to have achieved its goal of re-education'. Time, suffering, humiliation and persecution have failed to weaken his faith.

He spent the last three years of his life at his mother's house, dedicating his few remaining strength to the apostolate, accompanying children to their First Communion, visiting the sick, translating religious texts and writing the Via Crucis of little souls, in which he imagines a child accompanying Christ to Golgotha. No complaints about the incessant suffering, the pain that never left him, no word of accusation against the persecutors. 'He knew how to distinguish between ideology itself and the bearers of ideology,' writes a fellow prisoner. He rejected ideology but welcomed everyone, even the jailers.

Janko died on his name day, 27 December 1965, the feast of St. John the Evangelist, at the age of 37, a Mission seminarian who offered the sacrifice of his life.

Ján Havlík fully embodies what Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*: 'I am a mission in this land, and for this reason I am in this world'. He was a missionary disciple where he was placed. In the darkness of the mine shafts and tunnels he participated in clandestine masses, he helped prepare and distribute the Eucharist, 'as if on a mission,' he said, 'because a better and more difficult place for a mission could not have been imagined by any missionary.'

In our culture of the provisional and ephemeral, Janko is a witness of fidelity and perseverance. Also for consecrated life, where - as Pope Francis repeats - fidelity is severely tested.

I am a mission for the lives of others: his life, offered 'on the paten of love' is, in particular for the whole Vincentian Family, an occasion to renew fidelity to Christ, to the Church, to the Holy Father.

Fr. Serhiy Pavlish, C.M.
Postulator General

JÁN HAVLÍK

Ray of sunshine for humanity

Homily by His Most Reverend Eminence Cardinal Marcello Semeraro

BASILICA OF THE SEVEN SORROWS OF
THE VIRGIN MARY, ŠAŠTIN (SLOVAKIA)
AUGUST 31, 2024



During the Rite of Beatification celebrated at the beginning of this Holy Liturgy and then in listening to the Word of God, the expression from the Martyrs' Preface resounded in my memory, which says: "It is you, O Father, who reveal your power in the weak and give the power of martyrdom to the powerless". This, which applies to all martyrs, is particularly evident in Blessed Ján. A testimony says of him that he was a well-balanced, joyful person, cheerful in company, open and attentive to the needs of others; after his arrest, however, his health gradually deteriorated. This was due both to the hard and heavy work he was subjected to, and to the persistent isolation, severe mistreatment and many tortures he endured. He died three years after his release, in total abandonment to God's will and forgiving his persecutors. 'It is you, O Father, who reveal your power in the weak and give to the powerless the strength of martyrdom'.

In the first reading we heard the words of the Apostle Paul: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Perhaps tribulation, anguish, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger, the sword?' (Rom 8:35). It is the love of Christ that is the strength that makes us overcome weakness, the energy that makes us overcome fear, the light that makes us overcome darkness. St Augustine exclaimed: 'Behold thanks be to whom you fought, behold thanks be to whom you toiled, behold thanks be to whom you did not fail, behold thanks be to whom you won' (Serm. 297, 4, 6: PL 38, 1362). And on another occasion he said: 'It is in hope that a martyr can repeat the words of St Paul. Hope, indeed, gives comfort along the way. The wayfarer, when he toils on the way, endures weariness precisely because he hopes to reach the goal. Snatch from him the hope of reaching it and immediately the possibility of going on collapses' (Serm. 158, 8: PL 38, 866).

What I wish to emphasise, dear sisters and brothers, is that Blessed Ján Havlík was a man of hope, and has been so from the beginning. It was the virtue of hope that made his vocation grow and sustained him. A sign of hope, in fact, is already the choice to be a disciple of St Vincent de Paul. This saint, in fact, is the name of hope for the poor, for the suffering, for the abandoned.

He used to say that it is necessary to 'imitate the light of the sun, which enlightens and warms and, though it passes over unclean things, yet does not soil itself' (Rules to Missionaries, IX, 2). Our Blessed certainly knew these words and he was truly a ray of sunshine for those who met him. 'He was extraordinarily friendly,' said a witness. - He had a silent joy within him... You could see that he radiated a deep spiritual life'. Another witness stated: 'Love for others is an aspect that I would describe as a defining characteristic of his personality. Ján manifested his spiritual depth in the most intense way possible in sharing his suffering, in motivating others to hope despite experiencing many difficulties'.

We know the reasons why he was isolated, subjected to inhuman labour, harsh interrogations, physical and psychological torture. He was not the only one. In the Positio finalised for the Cause on martyrdom, it was recalled that during his imprisonment our Blessed met Salesian priest Titus Zeman, who was also beatified in 2017.





He was a victim of a regime that wanted to destroy the religious phenomenon and in particular the Catholic Church and its ministers. In the testimonies it is also said that during his imprisonment our Blessed copied at night, writing with a pencil and making copies also for others, the Integral Humanism of Jacques Maritain, a French philosopher whom Paul VI described as a 'master in the art of thinking, living and praying'. About 350 pages! I wondered why he undertook such a laborious and even risky task. I, therefore, found pages in that work that describe the situation Ján Havlík was experiencing. The truth, I read there, 'is that it is a persecution in disguise; in reality it is a struggle against God, of extermination of religion work of spiritual destruction. The essential thing is to hold the word of God captive (cf. ed. it. Borla, Turin 1963, p. 129). To all this our Blessed opposed fidelity to God, fidelity to his own vocation, his choice of charity towards others. He persevered in his vocation even during his cruel imprisonment, said Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter for Beatification.

This model of fidelity is officially proposed today, certainly to the Slovak Church, but also to all Christians and, I would like to add, to all those who work in favour of human dignity and freedom of conscience. This is where the topicality of this beatification lies, since in many cases and even in different contexts it is difficult, sometimes heroic, to remain faithful to Christ. The words of Jesus, heard during the proclamation of the Gospel, remain valid: 'Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it' (Lk 9:24). St Gregory the Great explained: 'It is as if one were to say to the farmer: if you keep the grain for yourself you lose it; if, on the other hand, you sow it, you make it renew and grow. For who does not know that when sown, the grain dies from sight and falls into the ground? But where it rots in the earth, there it springs up and is renewed. This is also what happens in the times of the Church: there is the time of persecution and the time of peace. The time of persecution is the time when life is lost' (cf. *Homiliae in Evangelia*, 32, 4: PL 76, 1235).

Jesus, however, completes by saying: 'whoever loses his life for my sake will save it'. This was very soon the conviction of all those who knew Ján Havlík and the fame of his martyrdom soon spread beyond the territorial borders. Today, the Church recognises this and confirmed it just now in the words of the Pope: Ján Havlík 'was a faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus, to whom he generously offered his life, forgiving his persecutors. In the gestures of gift and forgiveness he is also similar to Christ Jesus, blessed for ever.

Amen.

The Prison, a Place of Mission

Greeting by Superior General Fr. Tomáš Mavrič at the end of the Mass of Beatification August 31, 2024

Most Reverend Eminence,
Most Excellent Apostolic Nuncio and Bishops here present,
Representatives of the Slovak State,
dear priests, brethren and religious...
Dear Brothers and Sisters

At the end of the Eucharistic celebration in which JÁN HAVLÍK, a seminarian of the Congregation of the Mission, was proclaimed Blessed, I would like to give voice to the sentiment of gratitude that rises from this assembly, from the Church in Slovakia and from the entire Vincentian Family, which has united in prayer to this moment of prayer, joy and celebration.

First of all, a profound thanksgiving to the Lord, who has associated to himself in the gift of his life one of our brothers: it is a privilege, a surprising grace to give one's life for Christ and for the Gospel.

From this evening, this local Church and the great Family of Saint Vincent de Paul, can count among the many stories of lives given, that of Janko, indicated to us by the Church as exemplary, a story to look to in order to grow in holiness.



Janko was faithful to the Lord's call, always, never hiding his love for Jesus and the Church, his priestly and missionary vocation. This perseverance in love made him a martyr: a martyr of fidelity.

He lived the call to be a missionary disciple where the Lord placed him. Without seeking excuses, alibis. In this way, the prison, where he was imprisoned because of his faith, was the place where he lived the mission, 'because,' he said, 'no missionary could have imagined a better and more difficult place. And, without being able to fulfil his desire to become a priest, he offered his life for all 'on the paten of love'.

On behalf of the entire Vincentian Family Movement, I repeat our thanks to the Holy Father for having given the Church another gift. A gift, which also means the responsibility to let him speak to our consciences of believers, to make him known so that the certainty that holiness is possible, is accessible to all, always, that fidelity to Love is possible.

Thank you, Your Eminence, Card. Marcello Semeraro, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, who today presided over the rite of beatification at the mandate of the Holy Father Francis, after having followed and accompanied the planned process of the procedure.

My gratitude to all the members of the Slovak Episcopate, the priests, the Vincentian brothers and sisters, the Vincentian laity, and all those who contributed to the organisation of this celebration.

May the Lord grant us the fidelity and perseverance and the boldness to be missionary disciples always, so that the place where we live may be for each of us the best place to proclaim the love and joy of the Gospel.

Blessed JÁN HAVLÍK, intercede for us!

Feelings of gratitude

Greeting of the Superior General Fr. Tomáš Mavrič at the end of the Mass of Thanksgiving for the Beatification

Bratislava 1 September 2024

Most Reverend Excellency, Mgr. Stanislav Zvolensky,
Metropolitan Archbishop of Bratislava,
Dear Tomas, Visitor from the Slovak Province of
the Congregation of the Mission,
Dear Priests, Brothers and Religious...
Dear Brothers and Sisters...

Yesterday in Šaštín, Ján Havlík, a seminarian of
the Congregation of the Mission, was beatified.
Janko - as his friends called him - was
proclaimed as the man of fidelity and
perseverance. This perseverance in love made
him a martyr: a martyr of fidelity. Fidelity to
Christ and to the yes to the missionary vocation
in the Congregation of the Mission.

At the end of the Eucharistic celebration of
thanksgiving for the gift of Blessed Ján Havlík, I
would like to give voice to the feeling of
gratitude that rises from my heart to the Lord,
who has associated to himself in the gift of his
life one of our brothers. I would like to renew my
gratitude to His Excellency Most Reverend
Monsignor Zvolensky, to you dear Tomáš, to the
priests, to the confreres and sisters, to the
Vincentian laity, and to all the members of the
Vincentian Family Movement, and to all those
who contributed to the organisation of the
solemn Beatification.



We are experiencing an extraordinary moment of
grace: we have a young seminarian proclaimed
Blessed, and at this very moment we have an
extraordinary opportunity to make him known not
only to the Church in Slovakia, but gradually to the
entire universal Church. For this purpose, however,
we need collaborators. I therefore invite all the
members of the various branches of the Vincentian
Family to turn in prayer to Blessed Ján Havlík, so
that the Lord may send us labourers into his harvest
and that his example may shine brighter.

May the Lord grant us the fidelity and perseverance
and the boldness to be missionary disciples always,
that the example of Blessed Ján Havlík not only
inspires us, but encourages us not only to keep for
ourselves the gift of his life and martyrdom, but also
to share it with others.

Blessed Ján Havlík, intercede for us!

The Relics of Ján Havlík



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