

THE SLOVAK CONFRES STRIDE TOWARD THE EAST

by Fr. Augustín Slaninka, C.M.

Each continent and nation has its own specific history, its particular character, and special disposition. The cordial and hospitable disposition of the Slav nations is well known. The peoples of Russia and the Ukraine are also religious. It comes as no wonder then that the bonds of communism and atheism weighed heavily on these nations. Some priests were prevented from practicing their ministry publicly, many were forced to convert to the Russian Orthodox religion, others were imprisoned or sent to Siberian concentration camps. Churches were closed, altars and organs removed, sacred vessels profaned. The churches were used as museums, agricultural exhibition halls, stores, halls for state ceremonies, etc. If people prayed or sang in front of a closed church on Christmas Day they were persecuted by the secret service and their children were discriminated against in public.

With Gorbachev and his reforms, God re-entered the public forum. Damaged and ruined buildings were returned to the Church, but there was no one there to serve the people. The requests of the ordinary in *Mukatchevo* (Ukraine) came at just the right time for two of our confreres from the Slovak province with the desire to be sent on mission **ad gentes**. The Father General, Richard McCullen, sent them toward the EAST. In 1990 they helped in the entire territory of the Transcarpathian region of western Ukraine.

There are two pastoral zones. In the first zone (near *U_horod*, the capital of Transcarpathia) the settlements are *Peretchin* (capital of the district), *Turja Remeta*, *Huta*, *Onokovce*, *Zabrodie*, *Zimerky*. The second zone, in a larger area around the town of *Mukatchevo*, includes the settlements of *Velkyj Bereznyj* (capital of the district), *Seredne*, *Dolhoe*, *Koltshinovo*, *Klatshanovo*, *Kushnitsa*. Since last year the pastoral ministry in the first zone has been delegated to the Congregation of the Mission by the ordinary of *Mukatchevo*.

Our confreres, Frs. Ignác Matkulík, Ján Sahnian, and Stanislav Zonták labored in these territories for a long time. Our confrere, Fr. Milan Šášik, who is the nuncio's secretary in *Kiev* (the capital of the Ukraine), has helped out too. Lately, he has ministered pastorally around *Kiev* (traveling distances of up to 500 km).

In all of the parishes we see the vestiges of the long-term atheism. Only old people and children go to church; no one from the middle generations and no men. People who do attend the Divine Liturgy, however, are very open to God's word. The parishes in which sisters (Daughters of Charity and others) work, are apparently more successful. The sisters serve the poor in homes and hospitals. They work as catechists. In some cases, they have permission from the ordinary to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word and to bring Holy Communion to the sick.

In November 1993, Msgr. Antonio Franco, Nuncio for the Ukraine and Apostolic Administrator of the Transcarpathian region, told the faithful in *Peretchin*: "You must respect the clerical shepherds coming from outside. They have come to Transcarpathia from neighboring countries. Yes, we now have religious freedom, but without these priests the faithful could not grow in their spiritual life and in their relations with the Church."

What is the situation of local vocations? God is calling them to our Congregation. In August 1992 I gave a spiritual recollection program in *Velkyj Bereznyj* to young men (about 20), who had come from parishes where our confreres serve. Afterwards, I had a discussion with a few of the participants who were interested in seminary studies. I asked them what they would prefer: to study in a diocesan seminary or to join a community of monks. The answer came from one of them, Vitalij Novak: "You came to the Ukraine. You proclaim the gospel here. We are your fruit. We want to join your Congregation of the Mission!"

At this time, two young men from the Ukraine, Michael and Anatolij, have completed one year as candidates in our Internal Seminary, *Koioe*. They are now continuing their studies at our Major Seminary in *Bijacovce*. Four aspirants, George, Leonid, Miroslav, and Vitalij are preparing for their final examinations. They are living temporarily at St. Vincent's House in *Bratislava*. May they grow and mature in wisdom and prudence. When they return to the Ukraine and re-enter the EAST as priests, may they bear good fruit for the Church and our Congregation.