

From The Tablet

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Throughout the 41 years of Communist rule in the former Eastern bloc country, an underground network of groups and individuals kept the Catholic faith alive, even to the point of ordaining married men and women. Last week, their achievement was belatedly honoured

It was at a moving ceremony at Vienna's UN-City Church on Saturday last week, 21 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, that the largest and best-known underground circle in the former Czechoslovakia – called “Koinótés” and founded by the late Bishop Felix Maria Davidek – received the Herbert-Haag-Foundation Award for Freedom in the Church, which is bestowed annually on persons and institutions “for courageous actions within Christianity”.

Although a disputed and controversial figure, Felix Maria Davidek's charisma and his extraordinary gifts have since been recognised by many Catholic churchmen, including bishops and cardinals. Davidek recognised the signs of the times and his response was prophetic.

Desperate situations, in this case severe persecution by one of the most relentless atheist regimes, merit desperate remedies and Davidek ordained married men and women to the Catholic priesthood. The survival strategies he undertook illuminate the Church's potential for reform, which never ends with the death of the reformers.

Already before the Communist takeover in 1948, Davidek was fascinated by Teilhard de Chardin's idea of an evolutionary progression towards greater and greater consciousness. He was convinced that, as well as studying philosophy and theology, seminarians should have a broad university education and also study the humanities and sciences.

While he was a seminarian in Czechoslovakia under German occupation during the Second World War, he dreamed of founding a Catholic university. After ordination in 1945, Davidek continued with his university studies. He read medicine and eventually acquired a doctorate in psychology. At the same time, he founded the “Atheneum”, a preparatory course for young Catholics, men and women, who had not been allowed to attend secondary schools during the German occupation, with the aim of preparing them for matriculation and thus enabling them to study theology.

In 1948, however, the Communists took power. Davidek continued with his Atheneum courses in secret but soon came under police scrutiny and was imprisoned. Fellow prisoners say he was a particularly audacious and truculent prisoner who frequently rebelled and consequently spent long periods in isolation. During his 14 years' incarceration he jotted down on bits of lavatory paper his meticulous plans for the Church's survival in an atheistic, Communist dictatorship.

The 1950s were the worst period of church persecution in Czechoslovakia. The theological faculties at universities were closed. Only two Catholic seminaries were allowed to remain open and both were put under state control. The bishops had forbidden seminarians to attend these state-controlled seminaries and soon many of them were imprisoned. One see after another became vacant and the secret police watched all church activities closely.

When he was released in 1964, Davidek immediately began to put his plans into action. He was soon able to gather many committed Catholics around him. They called their group “Koinótés” (derived from koinonia, the Greek word meaning community) and met regularly in secret at night and at the weekends as it was compulsory to have a job in the daytime.

Davidek taught a wide range of subjects and secretly invited prominent churchmen as guest speakers. Thanks to friends who had smuggled them in from abroad, he was also able to study the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council and the works of Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac and other well-known theologians of the time with his pupils.

The biggest challenge was to secure a sufficient number of dependable priests who could be relied on not to collaborate with the regime. Up to 1967, candidates were sent abroad to be ordained clandestinely in Germany or Poland. Both Archbishop Karol Wojtyla of Cracow, later to become Pope John Paul II, and Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, then Bishop of Berlin, clandestinely ordained Czechoslovak priests at that time.

Davidek knew he would never get permission to leave the country, so he sent Jan Blaha, a young chemist who attended conferences abroad and was a member of Koinótés, to Augsburg where he was clandestinely ordained by Bishop Josef Stimpfle. A few months later, in Prague in October 1967, Blaha was consecrated bishop by Bishop Peter Dubovsky, a Slovak Jesuit, who had himself been clandestinely ordained. Bishop Blaha then consecrated Felix Davidek. All these ordinations and consecrations have since been fully recognised and declared valid by the Vatican.

From then on, Koinótés became the nucleus of a clandestine network of committed Catholic groups in Czechoslovakia. Davidek was convinced that the Church could only survive and fulfil its mandate in small entities and that, as in the early Church, each group should have its own bishop, so he soon ordained a considerable number of them. After Soviet tanks destroyed the short-lived Prague Spring of 1968, Davidek lived with the fear that the Communists might at any time attempt to liquidate the Church altogether by deporting all clerics to Siberia, and so he consecrated stand-by bishops, in reserve as it were, to take over should such a situation arise.

He also ordained married men, at first for the Greek-Catholic rite, where it is the custom. The Greek-Catholic Church had been dissolved by the Communists and forcibly incorporated into the Orthodox Church and both its bishops imprisoned. Many of its members became martyrs but some escaped and went underground. Koinótés worked closely with these.

Later, Davidek also ordained Latin-rite married men as bi-ritual priests who were permitted to celebrate in both rites. He even consecrated one married bishop. One of the chief reasons for these initiatives was that the authorities were highly unlikely to suspect married men of being priests in Latin-rite Catholic Moravia.

Davidek also went so far as to ordain a small number of women. For some time now, he had been discussing women’s role in the Church at the Koinótés meetings. He was convinced that as women had baptised, distributed Communion to the sick and had their place as women deacons in the Church’s hierarchy in the first millennium, they were only excluded from the priesthood for historical and not dogmatic reasons. His main reason for ordaining women was pastoral. Women in women’s prisons, especially women Religious who were imprisoned on a large scale and often exposed to horrible sexual torture, had no one to care for their spiritual

needs, whereas in men's prisons there were usually several priests among the male prisoners.

In December 1970, he called a special "pastoral synod" to discuss women's role in the Church, but when he put women's ordination to the vote, half of the Koinótés members who attended voted against it. The issue split the community and became a benchmark in its history. A few days later, nevertheless, Davidek ordained Ludmila Javorová, a prominent member of Koinotes, and later made her his vicar general, which she remained until his death in 1988.

I remember discussing Bishop Davidek and his ordination of married men and women with the late Archbishop John Bukovsky in Vienna in the late 1990s. Bukovsky, who had by then retired, told me that the Vatican had sent him on a fact-finding mission to Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1977. He had been able to talk with Bishop Davidek for several hours, he said, and knew that Davidek had ordained both married men and women. "I was most surprised to be welcomed by his woman vicar general dressed in white and wearing a cross," he added. The ordinations were illicit but valid, he underlined at the time, and said that Rome had been fully informed.

When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, many clandestinely ordained priests and bishops, especially those from Koinótés, at first had high hopes that Rome would allow them to form a special personal prelature so that they could continue with their work. It took years to sort out their ordination status, as clandestine ordinations were rarely set down in writing. Most of them had to agree to be conditionally reordained in case their ordinations were not valid. A number of married priests were then taken over by the re-established Greek-Catholic Church.

In 1992, those who refused to be re-ordained were forbidden to practise their priestly ministry under threat of excommunication. And all this time, of course, Ludmila Javorová and her women colleagues were completely ignored. At the award ceremony she said: "The work has been begun. Others must continue it. Even if the Vatican considers the matter closed, it is my firm belief that at some point in the future this dossier will be reopened."

For years after 1989, whenever I met any of these underground priests, which I did and continue to do on a regular basis, they still hoped against hope that Rome would change its mind. They would beg me not to publish interviews and refused to criticise the powers-that-be in Rome in any way in case this would damage their cause. Gradually, as the older ones died and their numbers diminished, they realised that they had been left to their fate. And yet they have remained what they were from the beginning – committed, humble and loyal Catholics.

At the prize-giving ceremony in Vienna, Bishop Davidek's Koinótés was for the first time publicly recognised for what it was – a valiant effort to assure the Church's survival under persecution. In their laudation, the Swiss theologian Professor Hans Küng of Tübingen University, Professor Hans Jorissen, a former professor of dogmatics at Bonn University and probably the leading connoisseur on the clandestine Church outside the former Czechoslovakia, and Professor Walter Kirchschräger of Lucerne University, all deplored the potential that had been lost. As Professor Jorissen said, "The concept of a missionary re-evangelisation in the Czech Republic, which today is one of Europe's most secularised countries, could have used the experiences of the clandestine Church, which was, and could still be today, a model for re-evangelisation."

This message is repeated in a new book on the clandestine Church in the then Czechoslovakia, *Die verratene Prophetie* ("Betrayed Foresight"), edited by Erwin Koller,

Professor Küng and Peter Krizan, and published in German by Edition Exodus of Lucerne.

Bishop Dusan Spiner, who was also Davidek's vicar general, said at the award ceremony: "The secular world is not a continent of barbarians and heathens to whom we must take the gospel message. It is our world and our heritage and it is in this world that we must courageously live as a church community."

Bishop Spiner and Ludmila Javorová came to Vienna to receive the Herbert-Haag-Foundation Award on behalf of Koinótés. They received standing ovations, especially when they announced that they would use the money for the birthday celebrations of Bishop Davidek, who would have been 90 this September.