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Reading “The Way” in Secret

Two bishops from Bulgaria share their testimony about the impact a secret translation of “The Way” had on their lives and on those of their parishioners in the later 20th century, when faith was persecuted in the country.

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Bishop Christo Proykov was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1946. He was ordained a priest in 1971 and became a bishop in 1994. From 1995

to 2024, he served as the Eparch of Sofia (bishop of the Eastern-rite Catholics). He witnessed the persecution of the Bulgarian Church up to 1989, which included imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom. During this period, one of his favourite spiritual books was the first Bulgarian translation of *The Way*.

Bishop Rumen Stanev, the other protagonist of the video, was born in 1973 in Kaloyanovo, near Plovdiv. He was ordained a priest in 1999 and became a bishop in 2020. He is now auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Sofia-Plovdiv. His experience of persecution under communism relates more to the discrimination faced by Catholics.

In the video, both share memories of their years as priests working with young people, their use of *The Way* for personal prayer, and the

challenges of living their faith in a country where it was persecuted.

Monsignor Proykov recalls: “As a priest, I could celebrate Mass, I could preach in church, but the secret services said that was all I was allowed to do. I couldn’t do anything with youth, no teaching catechism, all other activity was prohibited. We did it anyway, but in secret.

“I worked with youth, we often met up in the church gallery, where the choir sings. There were really only a few of them, not a lot of young people, but they were very good people who grew in their faith. I like to recall that time in particular, when we would go out of the city on excursions. We were so happy to be together.

“In those times of persecution, everything was difficult, it was dangerous, but there was also a romance to it, in a way. Let’s say that

if you managed to go on an excursion without anything happening, you felt very happy that nothing had gone wrong and that you had done your duty.

“When *The Way* was published, translated by a priest who had also been imprisoned, Father Kupa Mikhaïlov, who did the translation completely in secret, and through Ricardo Estarriol (who was also courageous, attending Mass every day, early in the morning, especially in the Carmelites’ church), he gave us all a very beautiful example; he gave us courage to live our faith.

“We didn’t even know that *The Way* was being translated. Everything was a secret between those two, Ricardo Estarriol and Father Kupa Mikhaïlov. In the end, the translation was published secretly in Vienna, and returned as a small blue booklet that I kept in my car.”

Monsignor Stanev remembers the spiritual benefit the book brought to him and the young people he served: “When I started going to church there was a small blue booklet, this size. I remember it very well. It may have been one of the few printed copies, if not the only one, and it was also very practical because it fitted in your pocket. You could carry it around easily, and I remember we used to read it very often with the young people when we got together.

“Later, on different trips, pilgrimages, gatherings, we used to play games with the book: ‘Pick a number.’ ‘385.’ ‘Let’s see what that one says.’ Then each person would say a number, all of us... We’d say, ‘Ah, the Lord wants to say something to you through this, through what you’ve heard.’

“But I think *The Way* influenced all of us deeply at that time, because it was

one of the few books we could read, and I think it helped us in a very positive way, because that was also the spirit of Opus Dei that Josemaría conveyed: sanctify our days, sanctify our time, sanctify every moment. That is Christianity.

“I think for all priests of that time, also for the sisters, and for the young people too, it had a huge influence, a positive one. I still read it with great pleasure, even with the young people, perhaps just something small... a little point to live by, like the Gospel of each day.”

Memories of the first secret

Bulgarian translation of *The Way*

The following account of the first Bulgarian translation of *The Way* comes from Ricardo Estarriol's memoir *Un corresponsal en el frío* (“*A Correspondent in the Cold*”). The translation is ours.

Whenever I arrived in a new country or city, one of the first things I did was find out where and when I could attend Mass the next morning. This is what I did the first time I arrived in Sofia in 1968, to cover the Warsaw Pact summit.

One of the first people I met at the press centre was a Catalan emigrant named Revuelta. He told me he worked as a journalist for some broadcaster, and I quickly realised he was there to see how the two newly arrived Spanish journalists (Eguiagaray and I) would manage to cover the summit.

Since it was too late to start looking around, I asked him where I could find a Catholic Mass the next morning. He likely had no official instructions, and simply told me what he knew: that the government had recently allowed a small chapel of Catholic nuns on Asen Zlatarov

Street to reopen, and that was where I found Mass.

The next morning, I left the hotel early and headed to the chapel. I pressed the bell at the gate of the small garden surrounding the church and waited. It was a long wait until a nun in the Carmelite habit opened the door.

I asked if they were holding Mass, and she said yes, but later, at seven o'clock. I entered the small church and, although there was no iconostasis, I realised it was of the Eastern rite. I sat on a bench. Gradually, half a dozen people arrived and stayed at the back.

There was some whispering, and I realised I had sat on the bench for the cloistered nuns (who could not observe the cloister fully, but at least had a bench). I moved away in time. Finally, the priest appeared — Bishop

Stratiev himself — and celebrated the Holy Mass in the Eastern rite.

For the rest of the day, I tried to guess what the Warsaw Pact leaders were doing to counter the Prague Spring, so I could report it in *La Vanguardia*. The next day, the nun asked me to stay after Mass because “the Mother Superior wants to speak with you.”

Naturally, my presence had caused a stir, and the half-dozen Carmelites there were somewhat disoriented. Mother Blazhena later told me, simply, about the difficulties faced by the Carmelite foundation.

When I told her I was a member of Opus Dei, she responded spontaneously: “We don’t know what Opus Dei is, but we imagine it must be a good thing, because recently *Rabotnichesko Delo* (the official newspaper of the Bulgarian Communist Party) published a furious article against it.”

I gave her some writings of Josemaría Escrivá that I had with me, and she arranged for me to speak with another priest the next day, who was to celebrate Mass. That priest was Kupa Mihaylov, a Greek-Catholic parish priest who had spent 14 years in prison.

He was the one who translated *The Way* into Bulgarian. The first edition had to be printed outside Bulgaria. He wanted no reward, but after much insistence, he said that a new typewriter with a Cyrillic keyboard would be very useful.

My next trip to Sofia was for the 10th Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1971. When I arrived a second time, the same nun greeted me with “*Khristos e vüzkrüsna!*” (Christ is risen).

I should have responded “*Khristos enaistina vüzkrüsna!*” (Christ is truly risen), but I didn’t react in time. It

was Easter week according to the Julian calendar, and this is the usual greeting among Eastern-rite Christians. On that trip, I met a young priest, Fr. Proykov.

I had forgotten to buy the typewriter in Vienna. I asked the nuns if they would prefer another gift instead. Mother Blazhena refused several times, but one sister in charge of finances suggested an automatic washing machine.

I imagined carrying a washing machine from Vienna, but the sister knew that the Korekom warehouses in Sofia sold the exact model they needed. In no time, she gave me the brand, type, and capacity.

These stores sold quality products, but only foreigners, members of the nomenklatura, or Bulgarians with legal Western currency could buy them. That evening, during a dinner with colleagues and diplomats, I

collected money. A German colleague and a Spanish diplomat generously contributed the remainder.

The next day, instead of attending Congress sessions, I asked the hotel porter to order a taxi. When it didn't arrive, he suggested I ask one of the drivers of the black Mercedes cars of the nomenklatura to take me, offering a discreet tip in dollars.

I didn't think it would be possible, but the driver assumed I was a foreign communist guest because I was wearing a red badge with my name and the hammer and sickle. It didn't surprise him when I gave him the Korekom address: he parked where he wanted, accompanied me, and called the manager, to whom I showed the note with the machine's details.

The operation was quickly completed. We carried the bulky package to the car boot, and even a

porter with a rope insisted on loading it. I thanked him, saying it wasn't necessary because the machine would remain on the ground floor. The driver transported it, barely fitting it into the boot, and despite traffic rules, took it to the address I had given.

When he stopped in front of the church gate, he looked at me in surprise: "*No tova e tsurkva!*" (But this is a church!). I told him it was indeed a church, pressed the bell, and asked him to help carry the washing machine. The porter opened the door, saw me, and called the whole community.

It was a sight to behold: a black Mercedes of the nomenklatura, with all the official party stickers, delivering a washing machine to a community of Discalced Carmelites, who accompanied the driver and me, exclaiming, "Miracle! Miracle!" We

made the return journey in total silence. I suspect the driver preferred not to tell his superiors.

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