

ANTONÍN CYRIL STOJAN (1851–1923)  
AND THE UNION CONGRESSES OF VELEHRAD:  
NEW DOCUMENTS FROM THE VATICAN  
ARCHIVES FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING  
OF HIS LEGACY

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**ABSTRACT**

On the occasion of the first centenary of the death of Antonín Cyril Stojan, Archbishop of Olomouc from 1921 to 1923, the article provides an original interpretation of some relevant aspects of his spiritual legacy. In analysing a number of documents kept in the Vatican Apostolic Archives (Archivio Apostolico Vaticano) and in the Archive of the Congregation for Oriental Churches (Archivio della Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali), the author outlines the peculiarity of Stojan's contribution to the quest for unity among Christians. The organization of the seven Union Congresses of Velehrad, held from 1907 up to 1936, based on Stojan's intuition, took place in a very difficult political and social context, including the First World War. Stojan showed how hope for a future good is not only linked to the present external conditions: it can be concretely cultivated in the forms granted by the age in which one lives. For this reason, even after his death, during the pontificate of Pius XI, the cycles of Congresses and moments of prayer and study of the Eastern Churches of the Byzantine liturgical tradition that Stojan had begun, continued. Regarding this original way of approaching interconfessional relations, some significant documents kept in the aforementioned Archives can shed light on two relevant dimensions of these cycles of Congresses, which remain faithful to the Catholic Church and rejecting proselytism as a means of spreading Catholicism.

**Keywords**

Antonín Cyril Stojan; Union Congresses of Velehrad; Orthodox-Catholic Relations; Vatican Archives; conception of Cyril and Methodius; Czechoslovakia; Holy See

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**T**he charismatic personality of Archbishop Antonín Cyril Stojan, whose first centenary of his death is marked this year, brought

an innovative way of living interfaith relationships and, at the same time, remaining within the current of the *magisterium* (that is, the teaching authority) of the Catholic Church. In order to better understand two characteristic aspects of this modality – the belonging to the Catholic Church and the rejection of proselytism as a means of spreading Catholicism – it is necessary to retrace briefly the stages of his life, paying particular attention to the social, political and cultural context in which he lived and developed his convictions in religious matters. Later, using some archival sources, it will be possible to trace the permanence of the aforementioned characteristics in the Union Congresses that took place at the Moravian shrine of Velehrad even after his death.

### **1. The Universal Church and its Czech People: Stojan's Religious, Social and Cultural Commitment During his Early Years**

Antonín Stojan was born on 22 May 1851 into a peasant family in Beňov, a village about 30 km from Olomouc. After a two-year term in the principal school in Stará Voda learning German, an essential prerequisite for German secondary school, between 1864 and 1872 he attended the Piarist Grammar School in Příbor and Kroměříž, where he obtained the high school diploma, excelling in all his studies.<sup>1</sup> From 1860, when the Austrian Constitution was proclaimed, a strong sentiment of nationalism spread and the Catholic pilgrimages in Hostýn in 1861 and in Radhošť in 1862, followed by the Cyril and Methodius festivities of

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<sup>1</sup> \*Abbreviations:

AAV: Archivio Apostolico Vaticano;

ACO: Archivio della Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali;

Arch.: Archivio;

ARSI: *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*;

b.: busta;

f.: foglio;

fasc.: fascicolo;

Nunz.: Nunziatura;

PCPR: Pontificia Commissione *Pro Russia*;

pos.: posizione.

Pavel Marek, Stojan Antonín Cyril (1851–1923). Erzbischof und Politiker, *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon*. URL: [https://www.biographien.ac.at/oebl/oebl\\_S/Stojan\\_Antonin-Cyril\\_1851\\_1923.xml](https://www.biographien.ac.at/oebl/oebl_S/Stojan_Antonin-Cyril_1851_1923.xml) (Accessed: July 15, 2023); Ludvík Němec, *Antonín Cyril Stojan, Apostle of Church Unity: Human and Spiritual Profile* (New York: Don Bosco publication, 1985), 2.

Velehrad in 1863, contributed to a revival of Czech national consciousness and, more specifically, of the Moravian ethnic consciousness. The institute, in both locations, but especially in Kroměříž, also participated in this upsurge. Straight after graduating, Stojan applied for acceptance into the major seminary of Olomouc, where he completed his studies while attending from 1872 to 1876 the Faculty of Theology.<sup>2</sup>

The University of Olomouc suffered because of the restrictive legislation of Franz Joseph I and in 1860 was closed by the emperor, with the sole exception of the Faculty of Theology, which was independent and remained open until the German invasion of 1939.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that there were positive elements in fiscal and economic policy, the neo-absolutism of Franz Joseph I, who revoked the March Constitution of 1849 by means of the New Year's Eve Patent (the so-called Silvesterpatent) in 1851, attempted to stifle nationalist impulses within the empire.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the two cultural associations that emerged among the academic community within the Faculty of Theology in Olomouc, promoting the cultivation of Slavonic studies and Czech language, i.e., the association of Slavonic Seminarians under the name of *Literatur-Verein* (Literature Association) and the *Vlastenecká Jednota* (the Patriotic Union) were banned. In 1868 through the joint efforts of the seminarists of Olomouc, Brno and Prague there was founded a new journal called *Cyril a Metod* (Cyril and Methodius) and in 1869 the *Velehrad Union* was established for the support of the sanctuary of Velehrad.<sup>5</sup> Due to the administrative centralism and anticlericalism which prevailed during the Adolf von Auersperg period of government as minister-president of Cisleithania (1871–1879),<sup>6</sup> these associations were about to disappear when Stojan began to revitalise them. Furthermore, as he was not sure he would become a priest because of the

<sup>2</sup> Nèmec, *Antonin Cyril Stojan*, 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the Palacký University Olomouc see the University official website. URL: <https://www.upol.cz/en/university/basic-information/university-history/#c3126> (Accessed: July 15, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Giulia Lami, *Storia dell'Europa Orientale. Da Napoleone alla fine della Prima guerra mondiale* (Milano-Firenze: Le Monnier Università, 2019), 64–65. One of the major actors of this tendency was the new interior minister and police chief from 1849 to 1859, Alexander von Bach. See *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nèmec, *Antonin Cyril Stojan*, 4; Anežka Kindlerová, 'L'eredità di Cirillo e Metodio e i Congressi di Velehrad,' in *I Santi Cirillo e Metodio e la loro eredità religiosa e culturale, ponte tra Oriente e Occidente*, ed. E. Hrabovec, P. Piatti, R. Tolomeo (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 256.

<sup>6</sup> Lami, *Storia dell'Europa Orientale*, 222–223.

anticlerical tendency of the government, at the same time he qualified as a public-school teacher. In this role, he promoted the revitalisation of the *Odbor pro Zakládání knihoven na venkově* (Association for the Foundation of Rural Libraries), which represented an efficient means of upgrading popular culture.<sup>7</sup>

After his ordination (July 5, 1876) he served as chaplain and parish priest in various Moravian parishes from 1876 to 1908.<sup>8</sup> On several occasions, he demonstrated his closeness to the ethnic Moravian population oppressed by the pro-German government as a part of his priestly vocation.<sup>9</sup> During his eleven years in Příbor, where he served as chaplain from 1876 to 1887, he organized two important movements: one for the renovation of Our Lady's shrine in Hostýn and the other for the restoration of the one in Velehrad.<sup>10</sup> This perfectly shows the two basic components of Stojan's spirituality that also characterised the years of his episcopacy (1921–1923): Marian devotion and the legacy of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, developed simultaneously and harmoniously with a civic and personal commitment to the poor and marginalised, as was ascertained during the 67 sessions of the diocesan phase of the process of canonization (1965–1985).<sup>11</sup>

What I have chosen to sketch of Stojan's biography certainly does not exhaust his human and cultural richness, but it does provide an insight into some of the essential aspects that he imprinted on the Velehrad Congresses, namely: the attention to the factor of ethnic and national belonging, conceived not as something divisive, but as an expression of the cultural richness of the social tissue; the central role of study for the correct understanding of religious, cultural and social phenomena; the active involvement of the laity in religious initiatives; and the consideration of the instances of the marginalised. These aspects were not only the result of the particular historical context in which they were formed and Stojan's inner convictions but also helped to shape the interconfessional dialogue of the early 1930s through the Congresses of

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<sup>7</sup> Nèmec, *Antonín Cyril Stojan*, 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Marek, Stojan Antonín Cyril; Archbishop Antonín Cyril Stojan, *Catholic Hierarchy*. URL: <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bstoja.html> (Accessed: July 5, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Nèmec, *Antonín Cyril Stojan*, 8–9.

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, 5–8.

<sup>11</sup> Biographical profile of Antonín Cyril Stojan on the official website of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. URL: <https://www.causesanti.va/it/venerabili/antonio-ciril-lo-stojan.html> (Accessed: July 15, 2023).

Velehrad, one of the most important occasions for Catholic and Slavic Orthodox exchanges at the time.

The waves of migration immediately following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 increased significantly the number of Eastern Christians in Europe. Facing the phenomenon of Russian emigration, European Catholics – and in particular those in the Bohemian and Moravian lands, due significantly to geographical proximity – found themselves having to deal with individual or entire communities of Russian Orthodox Christians, who, voluntarily or compelled by the newly installed government, had left the territories of the former Tsarist Empire. The question of unity between the Churches and, within it, the role of the Oriental liturgical rite was at the centre of the intellectual debate of a large part of the Russian intelligentsia,<sup>12</sup> as well as of bishops, priests and lay Catholics involved in the reception of refugees.<sup>13</sup>

The Holy See, for its part, activated a series of charitable initiatives which, however, were influenced by the French Jesuit Michel d'Herbigny.<sup>14</sup> As the trusted man of Pius XI from 1922 onwards for relations with the Russian world, he was a promoter of proselytising initiatives in the interdenominational field. As I will discuss later, his influence also extended to the Fourth (1924), Fifth (1927) and Sixth (1932) Congresses of Velehrad,<sup>15</sup> but it was dampened and, in a sense, limited by Stojan's spiritual legacy.

<sup>12</sup> On the idea of the union of the Christian Churches in the main Russian philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries see: Елена Бессчетнова, *Идея христианского единства в русской мысли XIX–XX веков* (Москва: Канон-Плюс, 2023) [Elena Bessčetnova, *Ideja christianskogo edinstva v ruskoj mysli XIX–XX vekov* (Moskva: Kanon-Pljus, 2023)].

<sup>13</sup> Among the many publications of the time dedicated to the topic of relations between Catholicism and Orthodoxy mention should be made of the one by the Catholic priest Ludwing Berg, who was actively involved in charitable activities among Russian emigrants in Germany. See: Людвиг Берг, *Русско-Католическая Церковь и православная Россия* (Берлин: Германия, 1926) [Ljudvig Berg, *Russko-Katoličeskaja Cerkov' i pravoslavnaja Rossija* (Berlin: Germanija, 1926)]. About L. Berg see: Laura Pettinaroli, *La politique russe du Saint-Siège (1905–1939)* (Paris: Ecole Française de Rome, 2015), 420.

<sup>14</sup> Michel d'Herbigny (1880–1957), dean of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, consecrated bishop in 1926, president of the Pontifical Pro-Russia Commission from 1930–1934. See: Antoine Wenger, *Rome et Moscou 1900–1950* (Paris 1987); Léon Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d'Herbigny SJ and Russia: A Pre-Ecumenical Approach to Christian Unity* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1990); Fouilloux Étienne, *Herbigny Michel d'*, in *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastique*, XXIII (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1990), 1375–1377.

<sup>15</sup> Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d'Herbigny*, 183.

## 2. The Concept of the Veneration of Ss. Cyril and Methodius

The self-consciousness of the Catholic soul of the Moravian ethnic revival took shape well before the birth of Stojan. In fact, already in the 1830s, the Catholic poet and priest František Sušil<sup>16</sup> gave new impetus to the veneration of Cyril and Methodius in the seminaries of Brno and Olomouc. Thus it was that, among various initiatives in the academic field, the National Association of Saints Cyril and Methodius was founded in 1849 by Moravian literati. It was within it that the specificity of the Catholic orientation of the Czech revival emerged and broke away from the liberal one in 1850, when the Catholic clergymen founded the *Legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius* (Dědictví sv. Cyrilla a Methoda), under the leadership of father František Sušil. Raising awareness of the problem of unity among Christians and, in particular, unity with the Slavic Orthodox believers characterised much of the association's activity, which promoted hundreds of masses and prayer initiatives for the cause of unity every year.<sup>17</sup> Stojan inherited Sušil's legacy and carried it on until his death in 1923.

At Stojan's encouragement, starting in the late 1870s, several pilgrimages of Slavic Catholic seminarians to Velehrad, the historical centre of the veneration of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, were organised, during which not only times of personal reflection, but also cycles of meetings on Cyril and Methodius unionist themes were held. In this way, the participants experienced not only a personal spiritual dimension but also a community dimension, meeting young Slavic seminarians from other nations. When in 1891 Stojan founded the *Apostolate of Sts. Cyril and Methodius* in order to promote the idea of the reunion of the Eastern and Western Churches, the political circumstances were not favourable to the peaceful development of the work: the political tightrope of Eduard von Taaffe, who served as Minister-President of Cisleithania in those years, was not able to resolve the internal conflicts of the different nationalist currents, of which the confrontation between the Young

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<sup>16</sup> František Sušil (1804–1868), professor of New Testament at the Catholic seminary of Brno, active promoter of the Pan-Slavic idea, based on the cult of Cyril and Methodius. See: Pavel Vychodil, *František Sušil: životopisný nástin* (Brno: Papežská knihtiskárna benediktinů rajhradských, 1898).

<sup>17</sup> Kindlerová, 'L'eredità di Cirillo e Metodio,' 252.

Czech and the Old Czech was one of the many that swept through the different party representations of the Habsburg Empire.<sup>18</sup>

However, since the 1840s,<sup>19</sup> the basis for future Union Congresses at Velehrad was thus created through pilgrimages, conferences, the *Apostolate* and activities involving Moravian laymen and laywomen. Stojan's main intention was to facilitate the rapprochement between Christians of the Eastern and Western traditions through the breaking down of mutual prejudices, with a special, if not exclusive focus on the Eastern Slavic Churches. However, the priest firmly believed that the union – which he considered achievable – would not only be the result of the joint efforts of willing individual men and women but would also require personal and communal prayer, combined with more strictly cultural and scientific activity. In 1904 and 1905, the Slovenian Slavist František Grivec,<sup>20</sup> together with the Prague theologian and editor of the journal of the Catholic clergy *Časopis pro katolické duchovenstvo*, Antonín Podlaha,<sup>21</sup> formulated the programme of the Cyril and Methodius concept as follows:

Our work does not lie in the possibility or otherwise of union: we do not address such questions at all, for these alone are sterile. It is far more important to follow the specialists who declare that the study of the Christian East is useful, necessary, and hitherto much neglected. We rightly avoid the word 'union' and speak of rapprochement, lest someone misunderstand us. It is necessary to work for rapprochement, so that the East understands and understands us more, so that we can at least somewhat reduce the prejudices of the East against the West. National prejudices, ignorance and cultural division also weighed in the schism [...]. The study of the Christian East is important and necessary for us because, due to our geographical location, our history, character and language, we are neighbours of the East. If we do not understand the East, we cannot fully

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<sup>18</sup> Lami, *Storia dell'Europa Orientale*, 224–225.

<sup>19</sup> Kindlerová, 'L'eredità di Cirillo e Metodio,' 252. On the *Apostolate of Sts. Cyril and Methodius* also see: Nèmec, *Antonin Cyril Stojan*, 39–41.

<sup>20</sup> František Grivec (1878–1965), author, together with Antonín Podlaha, of the book *Idea cyrillo-methodějská* (Velehrad, 1905). A list of Grivec's major works can be found at the following link: <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Grivec%2c%20Frantis%26%25x030c%3b> (Accessed: July 16, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> Antonín Podlaha (1865–1932), Church historian, archivist, publisher. See: Forst Vladimír, Opelík Jiří, Merhaut Luboš (edited by), Podlaha Antonín, *Lexikon české literatury. Osobnosti, díla, instituce 4, část 2. U–Ž. Dodatky A–Ř* (Praga: Academia, 2008), 1951.

understand our position among the educated nations and in the Catholic Church, we will not be able to continue successful, we will not be able to organise ourselves.<sup>22</sup>

### **3. An Approach That Was Ahead of Its Time Following the *Magisterium*: The Seven Union Congresses in Velehrad**

The risk of being misunderstood and accused of pursuing a pan-Slavic political vision was high, and Stojan was aware of this from the very beginning of the Union Congresses in Velehrad, as he always sought the support and understanding of Rome.<sup>23</sup>

The first one was organised in 1907 and they continued even after his death until the Second world war. The seven Union Congresses in Velehrad were attended not only by intellectuals and experts on Eastern Christianity, but also by Catholic priests who in their pastoral work had to deal with Eastern-rite Christians and others who wished to meet with the leaders of Catholic unionist work. So that the work of the Congress would not be disparate and fruitless, it was decided not only to deal directly and extensively with the issues of relations between Catholics and Orthodox, but also, starting with the Second Congress (1909), to divide the work into a theoretical and a practical part. However, the most important of all the achievements of the cycle of Congresses was the theoretical part.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, while the first three Congresses (1907, 1909 and 1911)<sup>25</sup> presented papers on a variety of topics, the next four ones revolved around a chosen theme: the Fourth (1924) and Fifth (1927) ones had

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<sup>22</sup> Kindlerová, 'L'eredità di Cirillo e Metodio,' 257–258, footnote 29. The same determined, yet mild and conciliatory approach characterised the Stojan's political commitment. When in 1897 he was elected as a deputy to the Vienna Imperial Council, within the Catholic People's Party, commitment was geared towards building the common good according to the spirit of the Gospel, being determined, but always meek and peaceful: 'Fortiter in re, suaviter in modo' ('Determined in action, mild in manner') was his motto. Nèmec, Antonin Cyril Stojan, 76. On Stojan's political commitment also see: *ibidem*, 76–79.

<sup>23</sup> Angelo Tamborra, *Chiesa cattolica e ortodossia russa: due secoli di confronto e dialogo: dalla Santa Alleanza ai nostri giorni* (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 1992), 425. On the attempts to politicise places of worship, see also: Kindlerová, 'L'eredità di Cirillo e Metodio,' 254–255.

<sup>24</sup> Maurizio Gordillo SJ, 'Velehrad e i suoi congressi unionistici,' *La Civiltà Cattolica* 108, no. 2 (1957): 577.

<sup>25</sup> On the first three Congresses see: František Cinek, *Velehrad vřry: duchovní dějiny Velehradu* (Olomouc: Lidové knihkupectví a nakladatelství, 1936), 443–448.



a purely juridical orientation, the Sixth (1932) a dogmatic one and the Seventh was dedicated to the history and theological and liturgical thought of Cyril and Methodius since 1935 (the year in which the Congress was to be held, then postponed to 1936) was the 1050th anniversary of Methodius' death. Numerous controversial topics in relation to the differences between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, such as the problem of the *Filioque*, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, etc., were touched upon at the Congresses. Therefore, while the atmosphere of the seven Congresses was characterised by a desire to find a common path to unity, which was deemed concretely possible to achieve, there was no desire to conceal the problems and propose falsely irenic visions to the participants.<sup>26</sup>

However, the Velehrad meetings were strongly affected by a rule imposed on them at the organisational level: from the Fourth Congress (1924), the Orthodox were not allowed to participate in the work in an active form, presenting their own papers during the public sessions, but only in a passive form, listening to the speeches presented by the Catholics, and in an active form only during the debates, almost always conducted in private.<sup>27</sup>

This condition imposed on the Congresses held after Stojan's death was due to the strong position of influence that Father Michel d'Herbigny SJ managed to gain with Pius XI from 1922 until 1933. A proponent of a model of relations with other Christian denominations that was still strongly influenced by proselytism, d'Herbigny first participated as an auditor in the 1911 meeting. Later, when in 1924 the Congresses resumed after a long pause due to the First World War and the death of Archbishop Stojan, the French Jesuit imposed his own vision on relations with the Russian world and thus also on the Velehrad Congresses, limiting the active expression of the Orthodox. When d'Herbigny was dismissed from Rome in 1933 at the behest of the pontiff himself, to whom the frequent abuse by the Jesuit of papal authority caused grave displeasure (ideas and decisions freely attributed to the Pope were often d'Herbigny's), the Velehrad Congresses had reached their last meeting, which was held in 1936,

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<sup>26</sup> Gordillo SJ, 'Velehrad,' 576–578.

<sup>27</sup> Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*, 512; Peter Esterka, 'Toward Union: the Congresses at Velehrad,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, no. 2 (1971): 40.

and could not experience a radical change from this organisational feature.<sup>28</sup>

However, the expressions of marked hostility on the Orthodox side towards the Velehrad Congresses was also a factor that negatively affected the Orthodox side's own willingness to actively participate in the meetings. For instance, the Orthodox priest Aleksej Mal'cev, chaplain of the Russian Embassy Church in Berlin, in the aftermath of his paper at the Second Congress in Velehrad (1909), was accused by many Orthodox newspapers of being too close to Catholicism, which is why the priest decided not to attend the Third Congress in 1911.<sup>29</sup>

Rather than analysing the handling of each of the seven Congresses held in Velehrad, highlighting their weaknesses and strengths,<sup>30</sup> I would like to focus on two aspects of the drive for rapprochement promoted by Stojan and those who later took up his spiritual legacy and held similar congresses: the strong sense of belonging to the Catholic Church – that went hand in hand with the rejection of the politicisation of the activities of the Congresses – and the inadmissibility of proselytism by their organisers. Indeed, paradoxically, despite the strong pressure exerted by d'Herbigny on the 1924, 1927 and 1932 Congresses, these two aspects continued to coexist in Velehrad.

These two peculiar characteristics of the Congresses emerge clearly through the analysis of the documentation on these initiatives preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Archive and the Archive of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. In particular, I noted the presence of important material on the Fourth Congress,<sup>31</sup> although these two characteristics were present in the other sessions too.

Let us now consider the first of the two aspects mentioned above. The charge of promoting pan-Slavism, levelled by the Catholic side at the First Congress, was tantamount to an accusation of alienation from

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<sup>28</sup> Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d'Herbigny*, 257, 279. Due to the Second World War, the congress planned for 1939 was not held. Esterka, 'Toward Union,' 37.

<sup>29</sup> Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d'Herbigny*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed history of the seven Congresses and the Velehrad shrine: Cinek, *Velehrad vřry*.

<sup>31</sup> See: AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247; AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 46, fasc. 340; on the Fifth and Sixth Congresses see: ACO, *PCPR*, pos. 397/28, b. 28. Although the research I have conducted has examined both the entire catalogue of the fonds of the Czechoslovak Nunciature at the Vatican Apostolic Archive and the Pontifical Commission *Pro Russia* at the Archive of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, I do not exclude – indeed, I hope – that further research in the future may lead to the analysis of new documentary sources.

the Catholic Church, understood as a Church with a universal character. Indeed, after the accusations from the Austrian Catholic press at the end of the First Union Congress in Velehrad in 1907 of promoting a political approach to the problem of the configuration of the different Slavic groups, metropolitan Andrej Šeptyc'kyj,<sup>52</sup> to whom Stojan left the direction of the work sessions of the Congresses, in the Second one, held in 1909, was quite emphatic:

I am amazed by the opinion recently disclosed by the – unfortunately – Catholic press according to which our conferences were instituted not out of a spirit of charity and faith, but with the aim of promoting pan-Slavism [...]. Far from us wanting to mix interests and political things with the most holy work of the universality of the faith, with the work of uniting the Churches!<sup>53</sup>

A review of the volumes of the Congress records (the *Acta Academiae Velehradensis*) will confirm the absence of pan-Slavic themes from a political point of view.<sup>54</sup>

The Slavic element is always presented as a historical element of the legacy of Cyril and Methodius, but it is not used as a means of promoting a political vision. The assiduous dialogue on the subject with Rome, always sought by Stojan and by those who continued the work of the Congresses, shows how the nationalistic – not ‘national’ – element was certainly disapproved by both the representatives of the Holy See and the organisers themselves.

As a folder dedicated to the Fourth Union Congress (31 July – 1 August 1924) in the archival fonds of the Czechoslovak nunciature in the Vatican Apostolic Archives shows,<sup>55</sup> the weeks leading up to the organisation of the event, held in 1924 a few months after Stojan's death, revealed a certain concern in Rome that the event was

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<sup>52</sup> Andrej Šeptyc'kyj (1865–1944), Ukrainian Catholic Archbishop, Metropolitan of Lviv (1900–1944) and founder of the Ukrainian Studite Monks (1901). See: Franz Adlgasser and Wolf-Dieter Bihl, Szeptycki (Šeptyc'kyj) Andrej (Andreas) von und zu Szeptyce, Metropolitan, in *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon*. URL: [https://www.biographien.ac.at/oeb1/oeb1\\_S/Szeptycki-Szeptyce\\_Andrej\\_1865\\_1944.xml](https://www.biographien.ac.at/oeb1/oeb1_S/Szeptycki-Szeptyce_Andrej_1865_1944.xml) (Accessed: July 16, 2025).

<sup>53</sup> Gordillo SJ, ‘Velehrad,’ 579. On the nationalistic tendencies see also: Kindlerová, ‘L'eredità di Cirillo e Metodij,’ 254.

<sup>54</sup> Gordillo SJ, ‘Velehrad,’ 579.

<sup>55</sup> See: AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247.

aimed exclusively at seeking rapprochement with the Eastern Slavic Churches. A few weeks before the opening of the conference, the minuant of the Congregation for the Oriental Church, Enrico Benedetti,<sup>56</sup> assured the nuncio in Prague, monsignor Francesco Marmaggi,<sup>57</sup> that Pius XI's address of greeting with the apostolic blessing for the conference would arrive in time. Benedetti remarked: 'Speaking about the Congress, the excessive particularism of Slavism should be removed from it, so that it generally deals with the union of dissidents with the Roman Church.'<sup>58</sup>

As shown by Pius X's message to the participants at the first session and Pius XI's messages on the occasion of the following Congresses,<sup>59</sup> the approval and promotion of the Congresses themselves was in no way in question. It is more likely, however, that the organisers were reminded of the need to refer to a universal context, given that the initiator of the Congresses had died. This remark was fully accepted while preserving the purely Slavic character of the event. This is also proven by the report on the Fourth Congress by the nuncio in Prague, who reported to cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the Vatican Secretary of State, a diplomatic incident that occurred during the proceedings.<sup>40</sup> With regard to the nationalistic anti-Polish claims of the Galician bishops, nuncio Marmaggi described the political appeal as a 'jarring note' in the context of scientific work aimed at quite different issues.<sup>41</sup> The full reading of the detailed report for the Secretariat of State by the unbiased voice of monsignor Marmaggi, since he was unrelated by birth to Slavic ethnicity, strongly highlights the atmosphere and the proceedings of the moderators in order to lead the work sessions adhering to the

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<sup>56</sup> Enrico Benedetti (1874–1941), doctor of Theology and Canon Law, minuant at the Oriental Congregation, chaplain at the 'provincial mental hospital' in Rome and then assistant at the Vatican Library. See: Cyrille Korolevskij, *Knjiga bytija moego (Le livre de ma vie). Mémoires autobiographiques*, tome 1 (1878–1908), (Cité du Vatican: Archives Secrètes Vaticanes, 2007), 501, footnote 410.

<sup>57</sup> Francesco Marmaggi (1870–1949), nuncio in Prague from 1923 to 1927, was created cardinal by Pius XI in 1935. See: Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, *Indice 1229*; Marmaggi Francesco, in *Enciclopedia Treccani online*. URL: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-marmaggi/> (Accessed: July 16, 2023).

<sup>58</sup> 'Parlando del Congresso si dovrebbe togliere a questo l'eccessivo particolarismo dello slavismo, perché si occupi in genere della unione dei dissidenti alla Ch. [Chiesa] Romana.' AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247, f. 54v. 5 May 1924.

<sup>59</sup> Gordillo SJ, 'Velehrad,' 580–581.

<sup>40</sup> AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247, ff. 262–276. 7 August 1924.

<sup>41</sup> In the document: 'Nota sonata,' AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247, f. 274. 7 August 1924.

purpose for which they had come together, without engaging in political issues that were outside the efforts of Christian unity.<sup>42</sup>

Obedience to Rome did not fail even with the imposition of d'Herbigny's proselytising vision, which required the organisers to limit Orthodox participation to private discussions. In line with the formulation of Grivec and Podlaha, as well as with Stojan's heartfelt affiliation with the Catholic Church, the strong ecclesial (i.e. religious) dimension of the Velehrad Congresses, which emerges by contrast from the rejection of the politicisation of the works, can also be discerned in the preparatory documentation of the Fourth Congress for which the surviving papers seems to be far more complete than for the other Velehrad meetings. Stanislav Zela,<sup>43</sup> secretary to monsignor Leopold Prečan,<sup>44</sup> Archbishop of Olomouc who had succeeded Stojan, at the end of 1923 sent monsignor Arata, secretary to nuncio Marmaggi, a draft of the programme for the fourth Velehrad Congress. The text presents some handwritten notes, most presumably drafted by the nuncio, with suggestions of various kinds, such as the request to add the treatment of the point of view of Eastern Christians on the 'Ecumenical Council' (with reference to the First Vatican Council, which proclaimed the dogma of the infallibility of the pontiff's pronouncements *ex cathedra Petri*) and to treat the question of unity among Christians from the perspective of historical investigation.<sup>45</sup>

The Fourth Congress gathered almost 400 participants.<sup>46</sup> The Nuncio's report on this meeting immediately proved to be a document of great importance, which helped the Roman Curia to better understand the Velehrad phenomenon. In fact, in the aftermath of the Fourth Congress, there was no lack of criticism – unfounded, according to the archival and bibliographical sources of the time at our disposal – from

<sup>42</sup> This can be seen particularly at *ibid.*, ff. 268–269.

<sup>43</sup> Stanislav Zela (1893–1969), Secretary to three Archbishops of Olomouc (L. Skrbensko, AC Stojan, L. Prečan), persecuted by the Nazi regime, Archbishop of Olomouc from 1941. Sentenced in 1950 in a mock trial to 25 years in prison, he served one year and then was under house arrest until his death. See: Jiří Hanuš, *Malý slovník osobností českého katolicismu 20. století s antologií textů* (Brno: CDK, 2005), 175–176.

<sup>44</sup> Leopold Prečan (1866–1947), Archbishop of Olomouc from 1923 until his death, he gave a strong impulse to the cultural and religious life of the diocese. See his biographical profile on the website of the Archdiocese of Olomouc. URL: <https://www.ado.cz/arcidieceze/historie/posloupnost-biskupu/leopold-precan/> (Accessed: July 17, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> In the document: 'Concilio Ecumenico'. The letter is dated 31 December 1923. AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247, f. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*, 510.

the Roman newspapers. On 12 September, Baron Constantin Wrangel,<sup>47</sup> a Russian Orthodox Christian who was living in Rome at the time, actively promoting unity between Catholics and Orthodox and taking part in the Velehrad Congresses, wrote to monsignor Marmaggi to ensure that the nuncio would not listen to the accusation made by a newspaper in the Italian capital that described the baron as an enemy of unity among Christians.<sup>48</sup>

The reply from the nuncio, who had attended the Fourth Congress together with the baron himself, was reassuring not only with regard to the single unfounded calumny directed at the baron but also concerning the information passed on to Rome about the progress of the Congress. He wrote: 'I have already done everything in my power to put the Velehrad Congress in its true light and to point out the merits of the distinguished personalities who took part in this solemn meeting of Religion and Charity to the Supreme Authority of the Catholic Church.'<sup>49</sup> The innovative approach promoted by Stojan on the problem of unity – or rather, rapprochement, as Grivec and Podlaha put it – through the indispensable combination of study and prayer, had quite a lot of detractors, even within the Catholic Church. Therefore, it can reasonably be assumed that Marmaggi's direct testimony helped the Vatican Secretariat of State and, therefore, the Roman Curia, to consider the phenomenon of the Velehrad Congresses objectively, ensuring that they never lacked the pontiff's benevolence.

Internal opponents let themselves be heard also during the same Congresses.<sup>50</sup> According to what was reported by the nuncio, the moment of maximum tension of the Fourth Velehrad meeting was on the second of the distinctive elements of the Union Congresses: the rejection of proselytism. Due to the massive presence in Europe of Russian emigrants in the years following the Bolshevik revolution, pastoral questions about the correct approach to be taken towards those who

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<sup>47</sup> No further data could be found on the person in question.

<sup>48</sup> AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 46, fasc. 340, f. 2. The documentation kept in the archive does not allow the name of the newspaper to be identified.

<sup>49</sup> In the document: 'Du reste, j'ai fait déjà tout ce qui était en mon pouvoir pour mettre le Congrès de Velehrad dans son vrai jour et signaler les mérites des insignes personnalités, qui prirent part à ces assises solennelles de Religion et Charité, à l'Autorité suprême de l'Eglise Catholique.' AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 46, fasc. 340, f. 4. 2 October 1924.

<sup>50</sup> On the protest telegram sent to the Congress participants by Father S. Bulgakov, N. Berdjajev and other members of the Russian emigration intelligentsia see: Esterka, 'Toward Union,' 25–26.

wanted to move from Catholicism to Orthodoxy or towards those Orthodox who approached Catholic priests and faithful for the most varied issues were commonplace in major European cities and went hand in hand with a great charitable effort put in place by the Catholic Church to help those who were in a foreign country without the necessary means of subsistence.<sup>51</sup> The Polish bishops' opposition to the current of liturgical thought that saw the Latin and Byzantine liturgies as equal in dignity, dignity and value they accepted only theoretically but not pastorally, was evident at Velehrad. As reported by Marmaggi, the assembly that met in the Moravian shrine, with the exception of the Polish representatives, condemned the latinisation of the Eastern faithful, and the proselytism associated with this practice. The heated atmosphere that pitted Archbishop of Mohilëu Eduard von der Ropp<sup>52</sup> against Michel d'Herbigny and Father Gleb Verchovskij<sup>53</sup> was dampened by d'Herbigny himself as moderator and by the nuncio, who explicitly asked the Polish archbishop not to speak in order to avoid unpleasant diplomatic incidents with the Orthodox and Eastern-rite Catholics present in the room.<sup>54</sup> It should be remembered that the French Jesuit was against the latinisation of Eastern Rite Catholics and those who converted to Catholicism from Orthodoxy.<sup>55</sup>

The disagreements with the Polish representatives did not abate and, on the contrary, became more pronounced to the extent that their participation tuned out to be extremely reduced in the work of the Sixth Congress (13–17 July 1932).<sup>56</sup> In fact, according to a letter kept in the

<sup>51</sup> On the subject see: Maria Chiara Dommarco, 'Modus operandi Святого Престола при рассмотрении некоторых запросов о помощи, направленных в Ватикан в 1920–1930-е гг.: на основе новых архивных документов,' [Modus operandi Svjatogo Prestola pri rassmotrenii nekotorych zaprosov o pomošči, napravlennych v Vatikan v 1920–1930-e gg.: na osnove novych archivnykh dokumentov'], Электронный научно-образовательный журнал «История» [*Elektronnyj naučno-obrazovatel'nyj žurnal Istorija*] 85, no. 11 (2019), doi: 10.18254/S207987840008073-9; Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*, 474–488.

<sup>52</sup> Eduard von der Ropp (1851–1939), Archbishop of Mohilëu from 1917. Arrested in Petrograd in April 1919, he was released in October of the same year through an exchange with Bolshevik prisoner Karl Radek. See his biographical profile on the website: 'Saint Petersburg encyclopaedia'. URL: <http://www.encyspb.ru/object/2860466686?lc=ru> (Accessed: July 17, 2023).

<sup>53</sup> Gleb Verchovskij (1888–1935), Byzantine Catholic priest, leading exponent of the Russian diaspora. See his biographical profile on the website 'Internet Archive'. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20060208032250/http://vselenstvo.narod.ru/library/verhovskiy1.htm> (Accessed: July 17, 2023).

<sup>54</sup> AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247, f. 269.

<sup>55</sup> Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d'Herbigny*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> On the Sixth Congress of Velehrad see also: Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*, 690.

Archive of the Congregation of the Oriental Churches, sent a few days after the end of the Sixth Congress by Duke Georg von Mecklenburg,<sup>57</sup> a Catholic with a German father and Russian mother, to Father d'Herbigny, only a few Polish priests from the diocese of Mogilev were present at that session of the Congress.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, according to Father Nikolaj Bratko,<sup>59</sup> a Russian Catholic priest of the Oriental rite, the Russian Orthodox present in Velehrad, who were clearly sensitive to any attempts at proselytising by the Catholics, were able to actively take part in several dialogues and discussions in private form, despite the fact that there was a significant lack of time for debate between Catholics and Orthodox.<sup>60</sup>

If, therefore, the presence of Orthodox priests and laity at the Velehrad Congresses persisted, despite difficulties on the Catholic and Orthodox sides, it must be reasonably assumed that the reception given to them by the organisers of the Congresses guaranteed, albeit in the forms granted to them by d'Herbigny, a real and fruitful space for discussion in private between Catholics and Orthodox, even though there was no lack of organisational problems in managing the timing of the various conference sessions, as Marmaggi also noted.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

The high risk of being largely misunderstood, as happened with a significant part of the Austrian and Polish Catholic believers and clergy, together with the difficulties of a political context imbued of tensions of a nationalistic type and of the First World War, did not prevent Stojan and his collaborators from committing themselves to promote rapprochement between Christians of the East and Christians of the West; their belief that unity was attainable was strong enough to deal with several problems and confrontations. Similarly, in the same years, in the interwar period, and also immediately after the Second World War,

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<sup>57</sup> Georg Aleksander von Mecklenburg (1899–1963), count of Carlow, duke of Mecklenburg. For the genealogy of the House of Mecklenburg-Strelitz see: <http://mecklenburg-strelitz.org/history/genealogy/> (Accessed: July 17, 20125).

<sup>58</sup> ACO, *PCPR*, pos. 397/28, b. 28, f. 5. 23 July 1932.

<sup>59</sup> Nikolaj Bratko (1896–1958), archpriest, converted to Catholicism in 1922. See his biographical profile on the website 'Biobibliografičeskij spravočnik'. URL: [http://zarubezhje.narod.ru/av/b\\_053.htm](http://zarubezhje.narod.ru/av/b_053.htm) (Accessed: July 17, 2023).

<sup>60</sup> ACO, *PCPR*, pos. 397/28, b. 28, f. 6. Bratko–d'Herbigny, 18 July 1932.

<sup>61</sup> See: AAV, *Arch. Nunz. Cecoslovacchia*, b. 40, fasc. 247, f. 275.



in what could be considered the eighth and last Congress of Velehrad (11–13 September 1947),<sup>62</sup> the pairing ‘study and prayer’ strongly promoted by Stojan found a large following and generated several similar events that need further historical studies, such as the conferences in Ljubljana (1925), Vienna (1926), Prague (1929), Pinsk (1930), Palermo (1930) and Syracuse (1931).<sup>63</sup>

This phenomenon that I would define as the ‘Velehrad current’, although realised to varying degrees in the various similar initiatives, never lacked the support of Rome, albeit with some more or less considerable moments of friction. Pius XI’s support for the Congress work of the Moravian shrine did not wane even after the promulgation of the encyclical *Mortalium Animos* (1928),<sup>64</sup> in which the pontiff condemned the attempts of some Catholics who, in pursuing unity with Christians of other confessions, were in fact espousing a non-Orthodox version of Catholicism, which was detrimental to the truths of faith recognised by the Catholic Church. The warm message of greetings addressed by Pius XI to the participants of the Sixth Velehrad Congress (1932) proves that the Velehrad Congresses never departed from the teachings on matters of faith of the Catholic Church.

The strong sense of belonging to the Catholic Church, which manifested itself in the principle of the universal – *Catholic* – Church, could not accommodate the combined problem of the search for unity among Christians and the political and nationalist demands of the time. This was reconciled in the figure Archbishop Stojan and in those who took their spiritual legacy with an approach that rejected proselytising as a means of spreading Catholicism. This way of understanding relations with Christians of other denominations, as the complete formulation of the decree on ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1965) had not yet been promulgated, can be defined as being ahead of its time.

Furthermore, the influence of Michel d’Herbigny did not prevent Velehrad from being a place of real dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox, despite the limitations mentioned above. The atmosphere

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<sup>62</sup> Gordillo SJ, ‘Velehrad,’ 576.

<sup>63</sup> See: Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*, 510–511; Presentation by Fr. Schweigl SJ: ‘Pio XI e l’Oriente slavo’. ARSI, *Russia 2003*, IV, 32, f. 4.

<sup>64</sup> The full text of the encyclical can be read on the Holy See’s website. URL: [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19280106\\_mortalium-animos.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19280106_mortalium-animos.html) (Accessed: July 17, 2023).

of listening, the willingness of the participants to explore further the often very specialised themes, the rejection of the latinisation of Eastern-rite Catholics (and, therefore, Orthodox converts to Catholicism), the guided meditations and the moments of personal prayer that took place during the various Union Congresses at Velehrad, represented a moment of conviviality that was generally experienced in a very positive way by the participants as the archive documents examined in this paper prove.

Therefore, it can be assumed that, as Metropolitan Šeptyc'kyj stated not without reason at the Fifth Union Congress in Velehrad, '*Qui semel Velehradum visitaverit, libentissime huc revertetur*' ('Those who come to Velehrad once will want to return').<sup>65</sup> The phenomenon that I have defined as the 'Velehrad current' and how much the two characteristics (fidelity to the *magisterium* of the Catholic Church and rejection of proselytising) of the Velehrad Congresses still remains to be studied in full. All of this has been attested in the archival documents taken into analysis, and yet it is an interesting theme that requires further research.

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<sup>65</sup> Gordillo SJ, 'Velehrad,' 576.