

BIOGRAPHY OF JAN BULA AND VÁCLAV DRBOLA

The life story of the martyrs Jan Bula and Václav Drbola

JAN BULA

Childhood and the path to the priesthood

Jan Bula was born on June 24, 1920, to Marie and Antonín Bula in Lukov near Moravské Budějovice. On the very same day, he was baptized in the parish Church of St. John the Baptist, where the dedication of the church to this martyr was being celebrated. He also got this patron saint's name. His mother came from Němčičky near Hustopeče and later moved to Lukov. Her first husband had died in World War I. Her second husband was Antonín, a railroad worker. Jan was their first son.

Despite their modest financial circumstances, Jan's parents enabled him to attend grammar school in Moravské Budějovice. Together with his classmates, he published a student magazine called *Ekrazit*, to which he contributed paintings and drawings. He graduated in June 1939 and subsequently entered the seminary in Brno.

Many seminarians had to interrupt their studies due to the war, and were sent to perform forced labour. Jan Bula was also sent in early 1943 to work as a labourer at the ceramics factory in Vranovská Ves. He returned in May 1944 to continue his theological studies, which he completed the following year. On July 29, 1945, he was ordained a priest in the Brno cathedral by the auxiliary bishop of Olomouc, Stanislav Zela. According to the locals, the most memorable event took place in Lukov on August 5, 1945, when he celebrated his first mass, his primacy.

Jan Bula was subsequently appointed chaplain in nearby Rokytnice nad Rokytnou. In addition to his priestly duties, he actively participated in public life – he was involved in Orel movement (Catholic sport and gymnastics

organization), helped to local amateur theatre group, and painted. Within Orel movement, he led a group of boys called “Orlíci”. Thanks to his cheerful and kind-hearted nature, he was very popular among the people.

In July 1949, the parish priest of Rokytnice, Stanislav Lakomý, died and Jan Bula was appointed administrator (temporary caretaker) of the vacant parish. Soon afterwards, he began the renovation of the local church.

The life of a priest after February 1948

In the postwar period, society underwent major changes. The political climate became more radical, shifted to the left, and the Communists won the elections in 1946. Although it was not immediately apparent, the Communists were preparing to seize complete control of the state. Following a government crisis, a coup occurred in February 1948 with the aim of establishing a communist dictatorship. During this period, the Communist regime’s harsh stance toward the Catholic Church began to manifest itself. Communists restricted and later banned Catholic publications, dissolved associations and church schools, confiscated church property, then direct persecution of clergy followed.

The bishops in Czechoslovakia attempted to inform the faithful about the current situation of the Church in the country through circulars and pastoral letters. On Sunday, June 19, 1949, the *Circular to the catholic clergy and the faithful* was read from the pulpits; a week later, the *Voice of the bishops and ordinaries to the faithful in the hour of great trial* followed. On the morning of June 19, Communist officials and a sergeant from the National Security Corps (the police at the time) visited Jan Bula and warned him not to read anything publicly. Two-thirds of all priests at the time feared possible reprisals from the state and did not read the circular. Jan Bula read it, and furthermore encouraged his parishioners to remain faithful to Christ and the Church.

„Let each of you carefully consider your every action...,“ he continued: „We do not want to betray our nation... but neither Christ.“

For these words and for reading the circular, he was fined and later also sentenced to one month in prison. He appealed, but his prosecution was halted at the end of October 1949 by a presidential pardon. The presidential pardon applied to all priests (approximately 120) punished for reading the circular, but it was merely a demonstrative step intended to convince the public of the regime's goodwill toward the Church.

In the early 1950s, the Communist Party primarily sought to eliminate the Church and collectivize agriculture. The residents, from whom not only land and property but also their faith were taken, nevertheless resisted these efforts. On the southeastern edge of the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands, people who had participated in the anti-Nazi resistance during World War II began to speak out against the totalitarian regime. Resistance groups formed in the districts of Třebíč and Moravské Budějovice, but by 1950 they had already come under the control of the communist secret police – the State Security (StB).

Meeting with Ladislav Malý

In early 1951, Ladislav Malý appeared in the Třebíč region; he had left Czechoslovakia for abroad in 1949 under unclear circumstances. There, he applied to join the American intelligence service Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) and was assigned the task of maintaining contact with refugees from Czechoslovakia. However, he embezzled the money entrusted to him and returned to Czechoslovakia. To this day, it has not been reliably determined who Ladislav Malý really was – whether he was an adventurer involved in resistance activities, a provocateur, or an unwitting collaborator of the State Security (StB), which seems the most likely scenario. What is clear, however, is that he was not a captain in the CIC, as he claimed to be. This intelligence service most likely did not assign him any tasks in the Třebíč region.

In February, Ladislav Malý visited his former grammar school classmate Jan Bula at the rectory in Rokytnice nad Rokytinou. He tried to gain Bula's trust by telling a false story about how he and his associates had freed Prague Archbishop Josef Beran from internment and were looking for a reliable

confessor for him. Jan Bula did not refuse this request and promised to visit the archbishop. He soon realized, however, that Malý could not be trusted, especially after Malý came to the rectory drunk and armed.

In the meantime, Malý had infiltrated local opponents of the regime, compromised many people through his visits and the letters he sent, and began inciting armed actions and acts of sabotage. Jan Bula disagreed with this and urged him to leave and not bring further misfortune upon others.

The State Security (StB) came for Jan Bula on April 30, 1951. At that moment, he was teaching religion at the school in Rokytnice. They took him to the rectory for interrogation and subsequently arrested.

Arrest and Imprisonment

His imprisonment took on a new dimension on July 2, 1951, with the nighttime events in Babice. On that day, Ladislav Malý, together with Antonín Mityška, shot and killed three Communist officials in the local school. This triple murder made it possible for the subsequent trials not to appear as fabricated as other political trials of the 1950s. It was necessary to quickly identify the perpetrators of the terrorist act and to punish, as an example, those who knew something about their activities and were inconvenient to the regime.

Ladislav Malý was shot dead on July 3, 1951, during an arrest operation. The Communists assembled the first group sixteen accused „resistance fighters“, out of those arrested, and Jan Bula was included in this group. The criminal complaint states: *„The priest Jan Bula can be identified as the main figure, because his position as a priest gave him considerable influence over most of the parish community.“* His anti-state activities were said to have begun with the distribution of anti-communist leaflets, continued with the reading of the circular, and culminated in his failure to denounce his former classmate Malý. He allowed him to stay overnight at the rectory several times, arranged a hiding place for him in nearby gamekeeper's lodges, and failed to report him after the attack in Heraldice, thereby allegedly committing the crime of high treason.

Trial and Execution

According to the testimony of his mother and sister, Jan Bula lost his front teeth as a result of torture following his arrest. He was sentenced on November 15, 1951. According to the verdict, he „abused the trust he had among the faithful as a clergyman for criminal activities and exploited the religious convictions of his parishioners to support bandits and murderers.“ The appeal proceedings ended with a rejection.

According to the testimony of Ludvík Stehlík Jr., Jan Bula accepted the unjust verdict with remarkable courage: „On the way back from the court to the prison, he spoke normally, he did not cry, he knew what awaited him. Nevertheless, in his thoughts he was already elsewhere. When we arrived in Jihlava, they were pushing us into cells. Bula stayed with the guard until the very end. He looked at each of us and blessed everyone, making the sign of the cross. He did not speak, only that cross. He was saying goodbye.“

On May 19, 1952, the day before his execution, he was allowed to write farewell letters to relatives and close friends. In a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, he wrote: „By the time you receive this letter, the one who remembers you will be looking at you from another world. I will already be with father, whose last words I often recall. He said: ‘you must come and sleep with me.’ My place will not be beside him. Yet I will be close to uncle Karel, who taught me my first steps and who laid his bones here in Jihlava. Remember me in Lukov, at my father’s house. I had many plans, as you know, and it takes so little for everything to end. My greatest source of strength is the knowledge that I served God faithfully to the end. A person can never love God enough, and that is the only thing one must regret. The Lord has given me a short life. But I believe it was not in vain.“

His final words betray no sense of despair, lament, or regret over his fate; on the contrary, they radiate calm, surrender, and gratitude for everything he was able to experience in both his civil and priestly life. His death underscores the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness, which ultimately lead to healing and inner freedom.

In the early hours of May 20, 1952, Jan Bula was executed by hanging in the courtyard of the Jihlava prison. The urn with his ashes was placed in an

unknown location after the cremation, most likely at the Central Cemetery in Brno.

VÁCLAV DRBOLA

Childhood and education

Václav Drbola was born on October 16, 1912, in Starovičky near Hustopeče as the eldest of seven children of Václav and Růžena Drbola. His father, Václav, was a disabled veteran and worked as a farmer; his mother, Růžena, took care of the household and the farm. After completing elementary school, Václav Drbola attended the grammar school in Hustopeče. Following his graduation, he entered the priestly seminary in Brno and was ordained a priest by Brno Bishop Josef Kupka on the feast day of Saints Cyril and Methodius in July 1938. He began his ministry as a chaplain in Slavkov u Brna and then in Čučice. From 1943, he served as a chaplain in Bučovice.

Chaplain in Bučovice

In the 1940s, several priests served in Bučovice, and chaplain Drbola was primarily responsible for teaching religion in the surrounding parishes. He was also actively involved in local associations and in the Czechoslovak People's Party. Due to his gentle, selfless nature and strong character, he was a popular and respected priest. Outside of church and religious instruction, he met parishioners mainly at the Catholic House, which served as a centre for the activities of members of the Catholic Journeymen's Association and the Orel movement (Catholic sport and gymnastics organization). Václav Drbola was apparently a skilled organizer, as he led both of these associations, organized theatre performances, and also prepared, for example, the celebration of the priestly anniversary of Bučovice Dean František Rašek, which was attended by Brno Bishop Karel Skoupý. Drbola was also interested in visual arts and collected paintings. However, immediately after the February coup, local communists labelled Václav Drbola as a „*troublemaker*“.

Like Jan Bula, Václav read out the *Circular to the catholic clergy and faithful people*, signed by Archbishop Beran; however, unlike Jan Bula, he did not add his own commentary. For this reason, he avoided conviction.

His document *The History of the Events of the Catholic Journeymen's Association in Bučovice* is an important legacy from this period. Václav Drbola describes there how he strenuously but unsuccessfully fought to preserve the Bučovice association after February 1948 and also provides an analysis of the social changes. It provides an accurate account of the events surrounding the February coup and the seizure of power. He fought for the Catholic Journeymen's Association, but even its planned theatre performance was banned. This Catholic association had to be dissolved due to its focus on youth and to enable its property to be confiscated.

Even then, Václav sensed that it was necessary to defend justice at all costs and to stand firm for what he believed in. Although he knew that his efforts could lead to severe punishment, he refused to be afraid. His sister recalls his moral strength and courage: „Václav led a procession of pilgrims on a pilgrimage, and they reported him for carrying a small cross. The Communists, however, wanted him to carry a flag. They came to him and told him to carry the flag. He replied: *‘When pigs fly.’*“

In the parish of Babice

In 1950, Václav Drbola was suddenly transferred to Babice near Lesonice in the Moravské Budějovice region. The local parish priest, Arnošt Poláček, had been arrested for “anti-state activities,” so Václav Drbola was appointed administrator of the parish in Babice effective March 1, 1951, taking up his post immediately. He fulfilled his priestly duties, taught religion at the local school as well as in neighbouring villages, took care of the parish farm, and began repairing the church organ. Like Jan Bula, Václav Drbola met with Ladislav Malý in Babice in the spring of 1951, and just like Jan, he heard a fabricated story about Archbishop Beran's escape and a request to hear the archbishop's confession. Václav agreed as well. Although he was warned after Jan Bula's arrest, the warning came too late. He was arrested on 17 June 1951. To draft the arrest warrant, it was sufficient that the suspect, Václav Drbola, had knowledge

of resistance groups in the region, which, however, had already been under close surveillance by the State Security (StB) agents for some time. Many resistance fighters were local residents and members of his parish. The sudden arrest of the Babice administrator came as a great surprise; at the time, the village residents considered Drbola's absence from the Peace March to be the only possible reason for his detention. The secret police left nothing to chance. They planned the arrest for Sunday at 4:30 a.m. They left the car outside the village, and to ensure the priest would not escape, they split up and approached the rectory from both sides.

Investigation, conviction, and execution

In the case of Václav Drbola, just as with Jan Bula, reasons for his arrest and indictment were only sought during the investigation itself. The murder of three officials of the local National Committee in Babice school on the night of July 2, 1951 made it possible to select individuals from the group of arrested persons who were not judged as opponents of the regime, but rather as individuals with knowledge of the perpetrators of the Babice tragedy. Václav Drbola, who served as a priest in Babice and lived next to the school, was forced to confess to having incited the murders. He was to confess to a crime committed as late as two weeks after his arrest, a crime of which he only learned while he was in prison.

Eyewitnesses who were in the Jihlava prison during the investigation of Václav Drbola later recalled hearing the cries of this tortured priest. Josef Pánek, a private farmer from Šebkovice, described how the screams of prisoners made the walls of the secret police building in Hluboká Street in Jihlava almost shake. „When they interrogated Father Drbola, I heard him shout: ‚Don't step on me!‘“ Václav Drbola was compelled to learn the required script for a staged show trial. According to the recollections of Ludvík Stehlík Jr., Drbola's cries during torture could be heard throughout the prison: „He was shouting: ‚don't kick me, kill me, I know nothing!‘ One night they put clamps on all his fingers, tightening them with screws. It takes quite a long time before the swollen fingers burst and it is excruciating pain. Such wailing could be heard all night that the entire prison couldn't sleep.“

The trial was prepared in great haste for July 12–14, 1951. Even before that, however, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had already decided on the sentences to be imposed on the defendants. Václav Drbola was sentenced in Jihlava by the Senate of the State Court in Brno to death for the crimes of high treason and incitement to murder. His appeal was rejected, and he was executed by hanging shortly after 5:00 a.m. on August 3, 1951. They did not allow Václav Drbola to say goodbye to his closest relatives, not even in letters, as was later permitted to Jan Bula. His body was cremated and secretly placed at the Central Cemetery in Brno. At the end of the 1960s, the urn with his ashes was handed over to his relatives who later placed it in a family grave in Starovičky.

Even at the time of Václav Drbola's conviction, voices in society appeared claiming that the trial was fabricated and that Drbola's death was martyrdom for the faith. Similar views expressed the Czech broadcast of Vatican Radio on July 16, 1951: *„We do not know the real reason for the capital punishment of priests and Catholic laypeople. We do not even learn this from official reports. It is hardly likely that the reasons were political, since priests are discouraged from any political activity by their church superiors and by Vatican radio. (...) If they were convicted in connection with the defense of natural rights and the inalienable rights of the human person, then they are true martyrs.“* However, this Vatican Radio report reached only a small number of listeners in Czechoslovakia at the time.

Just like Jan Bula, Václav Drbola was degraded by the then Bishop of Brno, Karel Skoupý, who was forced to take this step by the communist authorities. In 2001, the ecclesiastical court declared this punishment invalid.

Context

Jan Bula and Václav Drbola were convicted in connection with the anti-communist resistance and opposition in the Třebíč and Moravské Budějovice region. The key event is considered to be the incident at the Babice school on 2 July 1951, when two men (Ladislav Malý and Antonín Mityška) entered the building in the evening armed with a pistol and a submachine gun. After the shooting inside, three people were left dead and one injured. However, on that

day both priests had already been in prison for several weeks. Despite this fact, they were convicted of involvement in these murders.

After the Babice events, the communists launched a hate campaign against the Church. They portrayed the convicted priests in the press as monsters and bloodthirsty accomplices of terrorists. The communist regime exploited the Babice murders to carry out a calculated, brutal, and exemplary repression aimed at intimidating its “class enemies” – unyielding farmers and the clergy. Both priests were deliberately drawn into the upcoming trials, about which Vojtěch Cikrle, Bishop Emeritus of Brno, says: „It turned out that the Babice case had a dual purpose: to create fear and to discredit the Church as a moral authority. The main objective, however, was to seize and consolidate totalitarian power.“

Beatification process

According to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, a martyr is someone who gives a testimony of faith and love for God to people and especially to their persecutors (cf. *Lumen Gentium* no. 42). Canon law distinguishes three elements that characterize Christian martyrdom, and every canonization process must prove with certainty that all of them are fulfilled.

The first is material martyrdom, which consists of actual physical death, not merely the intent to cause it. The second element is formal martyrdom, which is fulfilled on the part of the persecutor who causes the martyr’s death. Their actions must be motivated by hatred of the faith, of some virtue of the victim, or more generally of a good work in general. Thirdly, on the part of the martyr, there must be acceptance of the death sentence out of love for God and faith, while the martyr must not seek this death.

The Church does not beatify Jan Bula and Václav Drbola merely because they endured injustice, hatred, and suffering in themselves (after all, others may have suffered even more). It is because they accepted this evil in Christ and transformed it into good: they united their suffering with His sacrifice, forgave, and bore witness to the victory of the cross, which turns defeat into a love stronger than death.

G. K. Chesterton aptly remarks: „A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside him, that he forgets his own personal life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside him, that he wants to see the last of everything. One wants something to begin: the other wants everything to end.“

Jan Bula and Václav Drbola did not die because they desired death, nor were they merely victims of injustice. As priests, they lived from faith. Their faithful and peaceful acceptance of an unjust death in Christ – the transformation of injustice into a testimony of love – it is what makes them martyrs.

Message

The lives of the saints are sustained **by faith, hope, and love**. In the same way, the lives of martyrs do not point us toward death, but toward resurrection. Jan Bula and Václav Drbola were fatally drawn into events that led to their execution – through a fabricated story by Ladislav Malý, who allegedly sought a reliable confessor for Archbishop Beran. Both priests agreed to visit and hear the archbishop’s confession. They are therefore martyrs because of their fidelity to their priestly service.

Their lives can be an inspiration for us even today:

They stood firm in what they believed, which is a witness to their moral strength and courage in the face of evil, both collective and personal. For example, Jan Bula’s priestly devotion to the bishop and to the faith is expressed in his comment: „We do not want to betray our nation... but neither Christ. Only Judas was able to betray Christ, fleeing from the Saviour’s faithful friends to his enemies and handing him over to them for a handful of coins. You must remain faithful.“ Similar testimony gives Václav Drbolas’s sister: „Václav led a procession of pilgrims on a pilgrimage, and they reported him for carrying a small cross. The Communists, however, wanted him to carry a flag. They came to him and told him to carry the flag. He replied: ‚When pigs fly.‘ “

The situations through which we learn of the heroism of both men are, at first glance, insignificant, harmless, and ordinary. What makes them significant is the backdrop of the communist regime. However, they illustrate the principle of fidelity in small things, which enables us to remain faithful and truthful in greater and more important matters.

Another message for us is that quiet, yet genuine love can be the most powerful force. Jan Bula wrote in one of his letters from death row (the day before his execution): „*My greatest source of strength is the knowledge that I served God faithfully to the end. A person can never love God enough, and that is the only thing one must regret.*“

We do not sense despair, lament, or regret over his fate in none of his final words. Instead, we read calm, surrender, and gratitude for everything he was able to experience in his civil and priestly ministry.

We often lack gratitude for what has been accomplished, and prefer to focus on what is not going according to our plans. Yet being able to see the good can often strengthen us to overcome even what is difficult.

All the mentioned facts contribute to the timeless dimension of these events – forgiveness leads to healing. Not only people in the regions where these tragic events took place, but our entire society needs forgiveness. In the Gospel, Jesus says we must forgive seventy-seven times. This is often difficult. There are wounds and injustices that divide our communities, parishes, families, and friendships. The testimony of Jan Bula and Václav Drbala, who patiently bore injustice and suffering, can inspire us to forgive others and thereby keep our hearts pure and open to the Holy Spirit.